

VORTEX

THE SCIENCE FICTION FANTASY

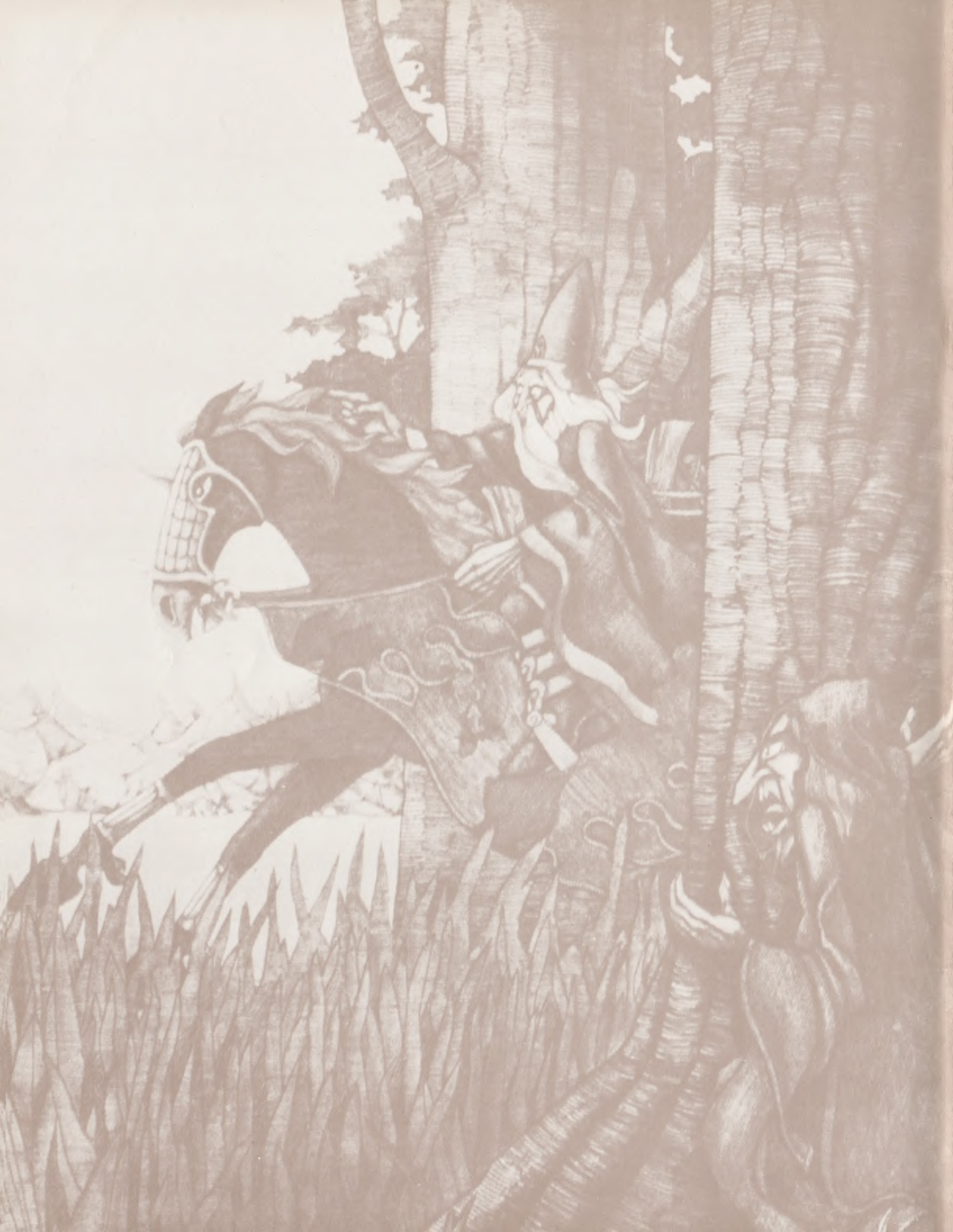
VOL.1 NO.2

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FEATURING:
MOORCOCK'S
"THE END OF ALL SONGS"

and stories by
CHRISTCHILD & CORLEY



EDITORIAL

In terms of a fiction genre's lifetime, before metamorphosis into yet another genre or complete death, SF has only recently become 'respectable'. Without doubt, if the American magazines of the 40's and 50's had never been published, there would be no such thing as Science Fiction as we have learned to recognise it.

Of course pure Fantasy has always been with us in the shape of myths and legends. Not only the legends of Europe and Scandinavia, ours directly by inheritance, but also ancient stories from thousands of foreign cultures. Robert E. Howard used such historical backgrounds when producing his fast-moving, dramatic tales of *Conan*; which fiction is now labelled 'Sword and Sorcery' and is attracting more writers and readers to its style and subject-matter perhaps faster than any other. J.R.R. Tolkien also used these legends as a stimulus for *The Lord Of The Rings*, which modified and made known to a wider audience what is now called Imaginative Fantasy. Sword and Sorcery fiction is more faithful to its inspiration, telling of heroes doing practically impossible things, purely for its excitement and entertainment; whereas Imaginative Fantasy purposely explains its settings, historical backgrounds, cultures and cosmologies — providing an equally pleasurable escape from our day-to-day living.

Hard Science Fiction, a distinct area of the complete Genre, is a result of the Industrial Revolution and the remarkable technological developments which have ensued. Hard SF stories depend on this technology for the key-point of their narrative, often skipping over such mundane aspects as settings in a very cursory fashion, and often employing cardboard cut-outs for characters. At least, this was commonly the situation in the explosion of SF in the 40's, but has since been corrected as readers become more demanding, and thus influence the approach of their writers.

Chiefly over the past decade or so, another pleasing phenomenon to occur within the Genre is the fusing of Science Fiction and Fantasy into Science Fantasy. Here the science and technology is not essential to the tale, yet neither is it superfluous. The technology is treated as part of the setting. For this reason, Frank Herbert's *Dune* is not SF, but Science Fantasy. Also for this reason, stories with weak technological involvement are prone to being labelled Science Fantasy when a preferable phrase would be Soft SF — fiction which involves (more than simply as a backdrop) but which does not depend upon technology.

This still leaves so-called 'New Wave' fiction, Speculative Fiction, and Horror out of our discussion.

Possibly we are at the threshold of a metamorphosis that will encompass the whole of the SF Genre. New types of fiction are developing and folding in on themselves, away from other types.

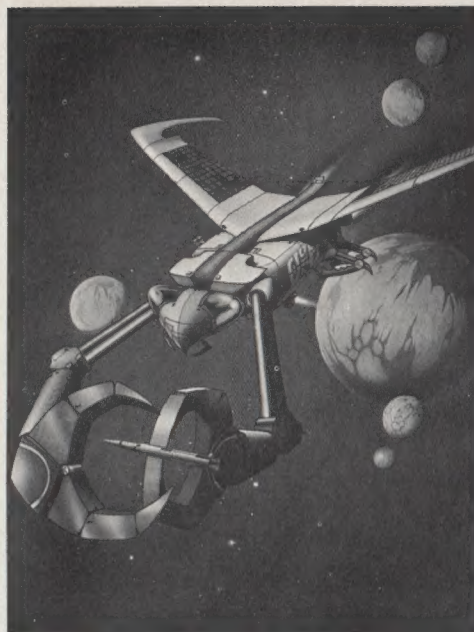
VORTEX is of too short a length to permit a thorough sampling of all these fictions in one issue, but naturally it is assumed that our readers enjoy all types.

With this in view, over the months, VORTEX will present a balanced selection of fiction from the entire SF Genre, leaving few stones unturned.

Keith Seddon *Editor*

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VORTEX

A Monthly Journal of Fantasy, Science and Speculative Fiction

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Michael Moorecock

PART TWO OF

The End of All Songs

*The Past is Honoured, the Future
Reaffirmed*

First there came a broad plane, a vast, level carpet of pale green; the jade power boat sped low over this — then avenues approached — spaced to have their entrances arranged around the perimeter of a semi-circle; each avenue leading inwards to a hub. The air car selected one. Cypressess, palms, yews, elders, redwoods, pines, shoe and plane trees sped by on either side — their variety proclaiming that the Duke of Queens had not lost his vulgar touch (Jherek wondered, now, if he would have it otherwise). The focus became visible, ahead, but they heard the music before they recognised details of the Duke's display.

'A waltz!' cried Mrs Underwood (she had renounced the sensible day dress for fine blue silk, white lace, a flounce or two, even the suggestion of a bustle, and the hat she wore was two feet across at the brim; on her hands, lace gloves, and in them a blue-and-white parasol). 'Is it Strauss, Mr Carnelian?'

In the tweeds she had helped him make, he leaned back against the side of the car, his face half shaded by his cap. One hand fingered his watch-chain, the other steadied the briarwood pipe she had considered fitting ('A manlier, more mature air altogether,' she had murmured with satisfaction, after the brogues were on his feet and the cravat adjusted, 'your figure would be envied anywhere' and then she had become a fraction confused). He shook his head. 'Or Starkey, or Stockhausen. I was never as familiar as I should have been with the early primitives. Lord Jagged would know, I hope he is there.'

'He became almost garrulous at our departure,' she said. 'I wonder if he regrets that now, as people sometimes do. I remember once that the brother of a girl I knew at school kept us company for an entire vacation. I thought he disliked me. He seemed disdainful. At the end of the holiday he drove me to the station, was taciturn, even surly. I felt sorry for him, that he should be burdened. I entered the train. He remained on the platform. As the train left, he began to run beside it. He knew that I should probably never see him again. He was red as a raspberry as he shouted his parting remark.' She inspected the silver top of her parasol.

He could see that there was a small, soft smile on her lips, which was all that was visible to him of her face, beneath the brim of the hat.

'His remark?'

'Oh!' She looked up and, for an instant, the eye which met his was merry. 'He said, "I love you, Miss Ormont", that was

all. He could only declare himself when he knew I should not be able to confront him again.'

Jherek laughed. 'And, of course, the joke was that you were not this Miss Ormont. He confused you with another.'

He wondered why both tone and expression changed so suddenly, though she remained, it seemed, amused. She gave her attention back to the parasol. 'My maiden name was Ormont,' she said. 'When we marry, you see, we take the name of our betrothed.'

'Excellent! Then I may expect, one day, to be Jherek Underwood?'

'You are devious in your methods of clinging to your point, Mr Carnelian. But I shall not be trapped so simply. No, you would not become J herek Underwood? Ormont?'

'The idea is amusing, even pleasant.' She checked herself. 'Even the hottest of radicals has never suggested, to my knowledge, such a reversal.' Smiling, she chewed her underlip. 'Oh, dear! What dangerous thoughts you encourage, in your innocence!'

'I have not offended?'

'Once, you might have done so. I am shocked at myself, for not feeling shocked. What a bad woman I should seem in Bromley now!'

He scarcely followed, but he was not disturbed. He sank back again and made the pipe come alight for the umpteenth time (she had not been able to tell him how to keep it fuming). He enjoyed the Duke's golden sunshine, the sky which matched, fortuitously, his loved one's dress. Other air carriages could be seen in other avenues, speeding for the hub—red and gold, plush and gilt, a fanciful reproduction of the Duke's only prolonged experience with the 19th century.

Jherek touched her hand. 'Do you recognise it, Amelia?'

'It is overpoweringly huge.' The brim of the hat went up and up, a lace glove touched her chin. 'It disappears, look, in clouds.'

She had not seen. He hinted: 'But if the proportions were reduced ...'

She tilted her head, still craning. 'Some sort of American building?'

'You have been there!'

'I?'

'The original is in London.'

'Not the Café Royal?'

'Don't you see — he has taken the décor of the Café Royal and added it to your Scotland Yard.'

'Police headquarters—with red plush walls!'

'The Duke comes near, for once, to simplicity. You do not think it too spare?'

'A thousand feet high! It is the tallest piece of plush, Mr Carnelian, I may ever hope to see. And what is that at the roof—now the clouds part—a darker mass?'

'Black?'

'Blue, I think.'

'A dome. Yes, a hat, such as your policemen wear.'

She seemed out of breath. 'Of course.'

The music grew louder. He waved his pipe in time. But she was puzzled. 'Isn't it a little slow—a little drawn out—for a waltz? It's as if it were played on those Indian instruments—or were they Arabic? More than a flavour of the Oriental, at any rate. High-pitched, too, in a way.'

'The tapes are from one of the cities, doubtless,' said Jherek. 'They are old—possibly faulty. This is not authentic, then?'

'Not to my time.'

'We had best not tell the Duke of Queens. It would disappoint him, don't you think?'

She shrugged compliance. 'Yet it has a rather grating effect. I hope it does not continue throughout the entire reception. You do not know the instruments used?'

'Electronics or some such early method of music-making. You would know better ...'

'I think not.'

'Ah.'

A degree of awkwardness touched the atmosphere and, for a moment, both strove to find a new subject and restore the mood of relaxation they had been enjoying till now. Ahead, at the base of the building, was a wide, shadowy archway, and into this other air cars were speeding—fanciful vehicles of every description, and most based on Dawn Age technology or mythology: Jherek saw a hobby-horse, its mechanical copper legs making galloping motions in the air, a Model T, its owner seated on the section where the long vertical bar joined the short horizontal one, and he heard the distinctive sound of a clipper ship, but it had disappeared before he could see it properly. Some of the vessels moved with considerable speed, others made more stately progress, like the large grey-and-white car—it could be nothing else but a London Pigeon—immediately in front of them as the archway loomed.

'It seems the whole world attends,' said Jherek.

She fingered the complicated lace on her bodice. She smoothed a pleat. The music changed; the sound of slow explosions and of something being dragged through sand surrounded them as their car entered a great hall, its ceiling supported by fluted arches, in which, evidently, they were to park. Elaborately dressed figures floated from their own air cars towards a doorway into the hall above; voices echoed.

'It dwarfs King's Cross!' exclaimed Mrs Underwood. She admired the mosaics (finely detailed, multi-coloured) on walls and arches. 'It is hard to believe that it

has not existed for centuries.'

'In a sense it has,' said Jherek, aware that she made an effort to converse. 'In the memories of the cities.'

'This was made by one of your cities?'

'No, but the advice of the cities is sought on such matters. For all that they grow senile, they still remember a great deal of our race's history. Is the interior familiar to you?'

'It resembles nothing so much as the vault of a Gothic cathedral, much magnified. I do not think I know the original, if one exists. You must not forget, Mr Carnelian, that I am no expert. Most aspects of my own world, most areas of it, are unknown to me. My experiences of London were not so varied, I would gather, as yours have been. I led a quiet life in Bromley, where the world is small.' She sighed as they left the car. 'Very small,' she said, almost under her breath. She adjusted her hat and tossed her head in a manner he found delightful. At that moment she seemed at once more full of life and of melancholy than he had ever seen her. He hesitated for a fraction of a second before offering her his arm, but she took it readily, smiling, the sadness melting, and together they ascended to the doorway above.

'You are glad, now, that you have come?' he murmured.

'I am determined to enjoy myself,' she told him.

Then she gasped, for she had not expected the scene they entered. The entire building was filled not by separated floors, but by floating platforms and galleries, rising higher and higher into the distance, and in these galleries and upon these platforms stood groups of people, conversing, eating, dancing, while other groups, or individuals, drifted through the air, from one platform to another, as, in her own world, people might cross the floor of a ballroom. High, high above, the furthest figures were tiny, virtually invisible. The light was subtle, supplying brilliance and shade, and shifting almost imperceptibly the whole time; the colours were vibrant, of every possible shade or tone, complementing the costumes of the guests, which ranged from the simplest to the most grotesque. Perhaps by some clever manipulation of the acoustics of the hall, the voices rose and fell in waves, but were never loud enough to drown any particular conversation, and, to Mrs Underwood, seemed orchestrated, harmonised into a single yet infinitely variegated chorus. Here and there, along the walls, people stood casually, their bodies at right angles to those of the majority, as they used power rings to adjust their gravity, enabling them to convert the dimensions of the hall (or at least their experience of those dimensions) to an impression of length rather than height.

'It reminds one of a mediaeval painting,' she said. 'Italian, are they? Of Heaven? My Father's house ... Though the perspective is better ...' Aware that she babbled, she subsided with a sigh, looking at him with an expression showing amusement at her own confusion.

'It pleases you, though?' He was solicitous, yet he could see that she was not unhappy.

'It is wonderful.'

'Your morality is not offended?'

'For today, Mr Carnelian, I have decided to leave a great deal of my morality at home.' Again, she laughed at herself.

'You are more beautiful than ever,' he told her. 'You are very fine.'

'Hush, Mr Carnelian. You will make me self-conscious. For once, I feel in possession of myself. Let me enjoy it. I will—' she smiled—'permit the occasional compliment—but I should be grateful if you will forgo declarations of passion for this evening.'

He bowed, sharing her good humour. 'Very well.'

But she had become a goddess and he could not help it if he were astonished. She had always been beautiful in his eyes, and admirable, too. He had worshipped her, in some ways, for her courage in adversity, for her resistance to the ways of his own world. But that had been bravery under siege, and now, it seemed, she single-handedly gave siege to that same society which, a few months before, had threatened to engulf and destroy her identity. There was a determination in her bearing, a lightness, an air of confidence that proclaimed to everyone what he had always sensed in her—and he was proud that his world should see her as the woman he knew, in full command of herself and of her situation. Yet there was, as well, a private knowledge, an intimate understanding between them, of the resources of character on which she drew to achieve that command. For the first time he became conscious of the depth of his love for her and, although he had always known that she loved him, he became confident that her emotion was as strong as his own. Like her, he required no declarations; her bearing was declaration enough.

Together, they ascended.

'Jherek!'

It was Mistress Christia, the Everlasting Concubine, clad in silks that were almost wholly transparent, they were so fine, and plainly influenced by the murals she had had described to her by one of those who had visited the Café Royal. She had let her body fill out, her limbs had rounded and she was slightly, deliciously plump.

'May it be Amelia?' she asked of Mrs Underwood, and looked to both for

confirmation.

Mrs Underwood smiled assent.

'I have been hearing of all your adventures in the 19th century. I am so jealous, of course, for the age seems wonderful and just the sort of period I should like to visit. This costume is not of my own invention, as you have guessed. My Lady Charlottina was going to use it, but thought it more suitable for me. Is it, Amelia, authentic?' She whirled in the air, just above their heads.

'Greek ...?' Amelia Underwood hesitated, unwilling to contradict. Then, it seemed she realised the influence. 'It suits you perfectly. You look lovely.'

'I would be welcome in your world?'

'Oh, certainly! In many sections of society you would be the centre of attention.'

Mistress Christia beamed and bent, with soft lips, to kiss Mrs Underwood upon her cheek, murmuring, 'You look magnificent, of course, yourself. Did you make the dress or did you bring it from the Dawn Age? It must be an original.'

'It was made here.'

'It is still beautiful. You have the advantage over us all! And you, too, Jherek, look the very picture of the noble Dawn Age hero. So manly! So desirable!'

Mrs Underwood's hand tightened a fraction on Jherek's arm. He became almost euphoric.

Yet Mistress Christia was sensitive, too. 'I shall not be the only one to envy you today, Amelia.' She permitted herself a wink. 'Or Jherek, either.' She looked beyond them. 'Here is our host!'

The Duke of Queens had been a soldier, during his brief stay in 1896. But never had there been a scarlet tunic so thoroughly scarlet as the one he sported, nor buttons so golden, nor epaulettes so bright, nor belt and boots so mirror-gleaming. He had doffed his beard and assumed Dundreary sidewhiskers; there was a shako a-tilt on his massive head; his britches were dark blue and striped with yellow. His gloves were white, and one hand rested upon the pommel of his sword, which dripped with braid. He saluted and bowed. 'Honoured you could attend,' he said.

Jherek embraced him. 'You have been coached, dear friend! You look so handsome!'

'All natural,' declared the Duke with some pride. 'Created through exercise, you know, with the help of some time travellers of a military persuasion. You heard of my duel with Lord Shark?'

'Lord Shark! I thought him a misanthrope entirely. To make Mongrove seem as gregarious as Gaf the Horse in Tears. What lured him from his grey fortress?'

'An affair of honour.'

'Indeed?' said Amelia Underwood.

'Insults, was it, and pistols at dawn?'

'I offended him. I forget how. But I was remorseful at the time. We settled with swords. I trained for ages. The irony was, however . . .'

He was interrupted by Bishop Castle, in full evening dress, copied from Mr Harris, doubtless. His handsome, rather ascetic features were framed by a collar that was perhaps a little taller than normally fashionable in 1896. He had disdained black, and the coat and trousers were, instead, bottle green, the waistcoat brown, the shirt cream-coloured. His tie matched his coat and the exaggeratedly high top-hat on his head.

'Jesting Jherek, you have been hidden too long!' His voice was slightly muffled by the collar covering his mouth. 'And your Mrs Underwood! Gloom vanishes. We are all united again!'

'Is it mannerly to compliment your costume, Bishop Castle? A movement of her parasol.'

'Compliments are the colour of our conversation, dear Mrs Underwood. We are fulfilled by flattery; we feed on praise; we spend our days in search of the perfect peal of persiflage that will make the peacock in us preen and say, "Behold—I beautify the world!" In short, exquisite butterfly in blue, you may so compliment me and already do. May I in turn honour your appearance; it has detail which, sadly, few of us can match. It does not merely attract the eye—it holds it. It is the finest creation here. Henceforth, there is no question but that you shall lead us all in fashion. Jherek is toppled from his place!'

She lifted an appreciative eyebrow; his bow was sweeping and all but lost him his hat, while his head virtually disappeared from view for a moment. He straightened, saw a friend, bowed again and drifted away. 'Later,' he said to them both, 'we must reminisce.'

Jherek saw amusement in her eyes as she watched Bishop Castle rise to a nearby gallery. 'He is a voluble cleric,' she said. 'We have bishops not unlike him in 1896.'

'You must tell him, Amelia. What greater compliment could you pay?'

'It did not occur to me.' She hesitated, her self-assurance gone for a second. 'You do not find me callow?'

'Ha! You rule here already. Your good opinion is in demand. You have the authority both of bearing and of background. Bishop Castle spoke nothing but the truth. Your praise warmed him.'

He was about to escort her higher when the Duke of Queens, who had been in conversation with Mistress Christia, turned back to them. 'Have you been long returned, Jherek and Amelia, to the End of Time?'

'Hardly a matter of hours,' said she.

'So you remained behind in 1896. You can tell us what became of Jagged?'

'Then he is not yet back?' She glanced to Jherek with some alarm. 'We heard . . .'

'You did not meet him again in 1896? I assumed that was his destination.' The Duke of Queens frowned.

'He could be there,' said Jherek, 'for we have been adventuring elsewhere. At the very Beginning of Time, in fact.'

'Lord Jagged of Canaria conceals himself increasingly,' complained the Duke, brushing at a braid. 'When challenged, he proves himself a master of sophistry. His mysteries cease to entertain because he confuses them so.'

'It is possible,' said Amelia Underwood, 'that he has become lost in Time; that he did not plan this disappearance. If we had not been fortunate, we should still be stranded now.'

The Duke of Queens was embarrassed by his own pettishness. 'Of course. Oh, dear—Time has become such a talking point and it is not one, I fear, which interests me greatly. I have never had Lord Jagged's penchant for the abstract. You know what a bore I can be.'

'Never that,' said Jherek affectionately. 'And even your vulgarities are splendid.'

'I hope so,' he said with modesty. 'I do my best. You like the building, Jherek?'

'It is a masterpiece.'

'More restrained than usual?'

'Much.'

The Duke's eye brightened. 'What an arbiter we make of you, Jherek. Is it only because of your past innovations, or because we respect your experience, too?'

Jherek shrugged. 'I have not considered it. But Bishop Castle claims that art has a fresh leader.' He bowed to his Amelia.

'You like my Royal Scotland Yard, Mrs Underwood?' The Duke was eager.

'I am most impressed, Duke of Queens.' She appeared to be relishing her new position.

He was satisfied. 'But what is this concerning the Beginning of Time? Shall you bring us more ideas, almost before we can assimilate the old ones?'

'Perhaps,' said Jherek. 'Molluscs, you know. And ferns. Rocks. Hampers. Water scorpions. Time Centres. Yes, there would be enough for a modest entertainment of some sort.'

'You have tales for us, too!' Mistress Christia had returned. 'Adventures, eh?'

Now more of the guests had sighted them and begun to drift towards them.

'I think some, at least, will amuse you,' said Amelia Underwood. Jherek detected a harder edge to her voice as she prepared to face the advancing crowd, but she had lost that quality when she next spoke. 'We found many surprises there.'

'Oh, this is delightful!' cried Mistress Christia. 'What an enviable pair you are!'

'And brave, too, to risk the snares and

vengeances of Time,' said the Duke of Queens.

Gaf the Horse in Tears, a Gibson Girl to the life, a sailor hat upon his up-pinned hair, leaned forward. 'Brannart told us you were doomed, gone forever. Destroyed, even.'

Sharp-featured Doctor Colospien, in a black, swirling cape and a black, wide-brimmed hat, his eyes glittering from the shadows of his face, said softly: 'We did not believe him, of course.'

'Yet our time travellers disappear—vanishing from our menageries at an astonishing rate. I lost four Adolf Hitlers alone, just recently.' Sweet Orb Mace was splendid in rubashka, tarboosh, pantaloons and high, embroidered boots. 'And one of them, I'm sure, was real. Though rather old, admittedly . . .'

'Brannart claims these disappearances as proof that Time is ruptured.' Werther de Goethe, a saturnine Sicilian brigand, complete with curling moustachios which rather contradicted the rest of the impression, adjusted his cloak. 'He warns that we stand upon a brink, that we shall all, soon, plunge willy-nilly into disordered chronological gulfs.'

There was a pause in the babble, for Werther's glum drone frequently had this effect, until Amelia said:

'His warnings have some substance, it would seem.'

'What?' The Duke of Queens laughed heartily. 'You are living denials of the Morphail Effect!'

'I think not.' She was modest, looked to Jherek to speak, but he gave her the floor. 'As I understand it, Brannart Morphail's explanations are only partial. They are not false. Many theories describe Time—and all are provable.'

'An excellent summary,' said Jherek. 'My Amelia relates what we have learned, darling of Dukes, at the Beginning of Time. More scientists than Brannart concern themselves with investigating Time's Nature. I think he will be glad of the information I bring. He is not alone in his researches, he'll be pleased to know.'

'You are certain of it?' asked Amelia, who had flickered an eye at his recent 'my' (though without apparent displeasure).

'Why should he not be?'

She shrugged. 'I have only encountered the gentleman in dramatic circumstances, of course . . .'

'He is due?' asked Jherek of the Duke.

'Invited—as is the world. You know him. He will come late, claiming we force him against his will.'

'Then he might know the whereabouts of Jagged.' He appraised the hall, as if mention of the name would invoke the one he most wished to see. Many he recognised, not famous for their gregariousness, were here, even Lord Shark (or one of his automata, sent in his

*In Which the Iron Orchid Is Not
Quite Herself*

place), who styled himself 'The Unknown'; even Werther de Goethe, who had sworn never to attend another party. Yet, so far, that last member of the End of Time's misanthropic triumvirate, Lord Mongrove, the bitter giant, in whose honour this celebration was being held, was not in evidence.

Her arm was still in his. A touch drew his attention. 'You are concerned for Jagged's safety?' she asked.

'He is my closest friend, devious though he seems. Could he not have suffered our fate? More drastically?'

'If so, we shall never know.'

He drove this worry from his mind; it was not his business, as a guest, to brood. 'Look,' he said, 'there is My Lady Charlolina!'

She had seen them, from above, and now flew to greet them, her golden robe-style, with its crystal beads, its ribbons and its roses, fluttering with the speed of her descent.

'Our hero and heroine happily restored to us. Is this the final scene? Are sleigh-bells to ring, blue-bloods to sing, catharsis achieved, tranquility regained? I have missed so much of the plot. Refresh me—regale us all. Oh, speak, my beauties. Or are we to witness a re-enactment?'

Mrs Underwood was dry. 'The tale is not yet finished, I regret, My Lady Charlolina. Many clues remain to be unravelled—threads are still to be woven together—there is no clearly seen pattern upon the fabric—and perhaps there never will be.'

My Lady Charlolina's disbelieving laughter held no rancour. 'Nonsense—it is your duty to bring about resolution soon. It is cruel of you both to keep us in such suspense. If your timing is not exact, you will lose your audience, my dears. First there will be criticism of fine points, and then—you could not risk this—uninterest. But you must bring me up to date, before I judge. Give me merely the barest details, if that is what you wish, and let gossip colour the tale for you.'

Smiling broadly, Amelia Underwood began to tell of their adventures at the Beginning of Time.

Jherek still sought for Jagged. Leaving Amelia to spin a yarn untangled by his interruptions, he drifted a good distance roofward, until his love and the circle surrounding her were a pattern of dots below.

Jagged alone could help him now, thought Jherek. He had returned expecting revelation. If Jagged had been playing a joke on them, then the joke should be made clear; if he manipulated a story for the world's entertainment—then the world, as My Lady Charlolina had said, was entitled to a resolution. The play continued, it seemed, though the author had been unable to write the final scenes. Jherek recalled, with a trace of rancour, that Jagged had encouraged him to begin this melodrama (or was it a farce and he a sad fool in the eyes of all the world? Or tragedy, perhaps?) and Jagged therefore should provide help. Yet if Jagged were banished forever, what then?

'Why,' said Jherek to himself, 'I shall have to complete the play as best I can. I shall prove that I am no mere actor—following a road laid by another. I shall show I am a playwright, too!'

Li Pao, from the 27th century, had overheard him. Insistently clad in blue overalls, the ex-member of the People's Governing Committee touched Jherek to make him turn.

'You consider yourself an actor in a play, Jherek Carnelian?'

'Hello, Li Pao. I spoke confused thoughts aloud, that is all.'

But Li Pao was greedy for a discussion and would not be guided away from the subject. 'I thought you controlled your own fate. This whole love-story business which so excites the women, did it not begin as an affectation?'

'I forget.' He spoke the truth. Emotions jostled within him, each in conflict with the other, each eager for a voice. He let none speak.

'Surely—' Li Pao smiled—'you have not come to believe in your role, as the ancient actors were said to do, and think your character's feelings are your own. That would be most droll.' Li Pao leaned against the rail of his drifting gallery. It tilted slightly and began to sink. He brought it back until he was again level with Jherek.

'However, it seems likely,' Jherek told him.

'Beware, Jherek Carnelian. Life becomes serious for you. That would never do. You are a member of perfectly amoral society: whimsical, all but thoughtless, utterly powerful. Your

actions threaten your way of life. Do I see a ramshackle vessel called Self-Destruction heaving its battered bulwarks over the horizon? What's this, Jherek? Is your love genuine, after all?'

'It is, Li Pao. Mock me, if you choose, but I'll not deny there's truth in what you say. You think I conspire against my own peace of mind?'

'You conspire against your entire society. What your fellows could see as your morbid interest in morality actually threatens the status quo—a status quo that has existed for at least a million years, in this form alone! Would you have all your friends as miserably self-conscious as me?' Li Pao was laughing. His lovely yellow face shone like a small sun. 'You know my disapproval of your world and its pleasures.'

'You have bored me often enough . . . ' Jherek was amiable.

'I admit that I should be sad to see it destroyed. It is reminiscent of that Nursery you discovered before you disappeared. I should hate to see these children face to face with reality.'

'All this—' the sweep of an arm—'is not "reality"?'

'Illusion, every scrap. What would happen to you all if your cities were to close down in an instant, if your heat and your light—the simplest of animal needs—were taken from you? What would you do?'

Jherek could see little point in the question. 'Shiver and stumble,' he said, 'until death came. Why do you ask?'

'You are not frightened by the prospect?'

'It is not more real than anything else I experience or expect to experience. I would not say that it is the most agreeable fate. I should try to avoid it, of course. But if it became inevitable, I hope I should perish with good grace.'

Li Pao shook his head, amused. 'You are incorrigible. I hoped to convince you, now that you, of all here, have rediscovered your humanity. Yet perhaps fear is no good thing. Perhaps it is only we, the fearful, who attempt to instil our own sense of urgency into others, who avoid reality, who deceive ourselves into believing that only conflict and unhappiness lead us to the truth.'

'It is a view expressed even at the End of Time, Li Pao.' The Iron Orchid joined them, sporting an oddly wrought garment, stiff and metallic and giving off a glow; it framed her face and her body, which was naked and of a conventional female shape. 'You hear it from Werther de Goethe. From Lord Shark. And, of course, from Mongrove himself.'

'They are perverse. They adopt such attitudes merely to provide contrast.'

'And you, Li Pao?' asked Jherek. 'Why do you adopt them?'



'They were instilled into me as a child. I am conditioned, if you like, to make the associations you describe.'

'No instincts guide you, then?' asked the Iron Orchid. She laid a languid arm across her son's shoulders. Apparently absent-minded, she stroked his cheek.

'You speak of instincts? You have none save the seeking of pleasure.' The little Chinese shrugged. 'You have need of none, it could be said.'

'You do not answer her question.' Jherek Carnelian found himself a fraction discomfited by his mother's attentions. His eyes sought for Amelia, but she was not in sight.

'I argue that the question is meaningless without understanding of its import.'

'Yet . . .?' murmured the Iron Orchid, and her finger tickled Jherek's ear.

'My instincts and my reason are at one,' said Li Pao. 'Both tell me that a race which struggles is a race which survives.'

'We struggle mightily against boredom,' she said. 'Are we not inventive enough for you, Li Pao?'

'I am unconvinced. The prisoners in your menageries—the time travellers and the space travellers—they condemn you. You exploit them. You exploit the universe. This planet and perhaps the star around which it circles draw energy from a galaxy which itself is dying. It leeches on its fellows. Is that just?'

Jherek had been listening closely. 'My Amelia said something not dissimilar. I could understand her little better, Li Pao. Your world and hers seem similar in some respects and, from what I know of them, menageries are kept.'

'Prisons, you mean? This is mere sophistry, Jherek Carnelian, as you must realise. We have prisons for those who transgress against society. Those who occupy them are there because they gambled—normally they staked their personal freedom against some form of personal gain.'

'The time travellers often believe they stake their lives, as do the space travellers. We do not punish them. We look after them.'

'You show them no respect,' said Li Pao.

The Iron Orchid pursed her lips in a kind of smile. 'Some are too puzzled, poor things, to understand their fate, but those who are not soon settle. Are *you* not thoroughly settled, Li Pao? You are rarely missed at parties. I know many other time travellers and space travellers who mingle with us, scarcely ever taking up their places in the menageries. Do we use force to keep them there, my dear? Do we deceive them?'

'Sometimes.'

'Only as we deceive one another, for the pleasure of it.'

Once more, Li Pao preferred to change

ground. He pointed a chubby finger at Jherek. 'And what of "your Amelia"? Was she pleased to be manipulated in your games? Did she take pleasure in being made a pawn?'

Jherek was surprised. 'Come now, Li Pao. She was never altered physically—and certainly into nothing fishy.'

Li Pao put his finger to a tooth and sighed.

The Iron Orchid pulled Jherek away, still with her arm about his shoulders. 'Come, fruit of my loins. You will excuse us, Li Pao?'

Li Pao's bow was brief.

'I have seen Mrs Underwood,' the Iron Orchid said to Jherek, as they flew higher to where only a few people drifted. 'She looks more beautiful than ever. She was good enough to compliment me on my costume. You recognise the character?'

'I think not.'

'Mrs Underwood did, when I reminded her of the legend. A beautiful little story I had one of the cities tell me. I did not hear all the story, for the city had forgotten much, but enough was gained to make the costume. It is the tale of Old Florence and the Night of Gales and of the Lady in the Lamp, who tended to the needs of five hundred soldiers in a single day! Imagine! Five hundred!' She licked purple lips and grinned. 'Those ancients! I have it in mind to re-enact the whole story. There are soldiers here, too, you know. They arrived fairly recently and are in the menagerie of the Duke of Queens. But they are only twenty or so.'

'You could make some of your own.'

'I know, flesh of my flesh, but it would not be quite the same. It is your fault.'

'How, maternal, eternal flower?'

'Great stock is placed on authenticity, these days. Reproductions where originals can be discovered are an absolute anathema. And they become scarcer, they vanish so quickly.'

'Time travellers?'

'Naturally. The space travellers remain. But of what use are they?'

'Morphail has spoken to you, headiest of blooms?'

'Oh, a little, my seed. But all is Warning. All is Prophecy. He rants. You cannot hear him; not the words. I suppose Mrs Underwood will be gone soon. Perhaps then things will return to a more acceptable pattern.'

'Amelia remains with me,' said Jherek, detecting, he thought, a wistful note in his mother's voice.

'You keep her company exclusively,' said the Iron Orchid. 'You are obsessed. Why so?'

'Love,' he told her.

'But, as I understand it, she makes no expression of love. You scarcely touch!'

'Her customs are not as ours.'

'They are crude, then, her customs!' 'Different!'

'Ah!' His mother was dismissive. 'She inhabits your whole mind. She affects your taste. Let her steer her own course, and you yours. Who knows?—later those courses might again cross. I heard something of your adventures. They have been furious and stunning. Both of you need to drift, to recuperate, to enjoy lighter company. Is it you, bloom of my womb, keeping her by your side, when she would run free?'

'She is free. She loves me.'

'I say again—there are no signs.'

'I know the signs.'

'You cannot describe them?'

'They lie in gesture, tone of voice, expression in the eyes.'

'Ho, ho! This is too subtle for me, this telepathy! Love is flesh touched against flesh, the whispered word, the fingernail drawn delicately down the spine, the grasped thigh. There is no throb, Jherek, to this love of yours. It is pale—it is mean, eh?'

'No, giver of life. You feign obtuseness, I can tell. But why?'

Her glance was intense, for her, but cryptic.

'Mother? Strongest of orchids?'

But she had twisted a power ring and was falling like a stone, with no word of reply. He saw her drop and disappear into a large crowd which swarmed at about the halfway point, below.

He found his mother's behaviour peculiar. She exhibited moods he had never encountered before. She appeared to have lost some of her wit and substituted malice (for which she had always had a delicious penchant, but the malice needed the wit to make it entertaining); she appeared to show a dislike for Amelia Underwood which she had not shown earlier. He shook his head and fingered his chin. How was it that she could not, as she had always done in the past, delight in his delight? With a shrug, he aimed himself for a lower level.

A stranger sped to greet him from a nearby gallery. The stranger was clad in sombrero, fancy vest, chaps, boots and bandoliers, all in blinding red.

'Jherek, my pod, my blood! Why fly so fast?'

Only the eyes revealed identity, and even this confused him for a second before he realised the truth.

'Iron Orchid. How you proliferate!'

'You have met the others already?'

'One of them. Which is the original?'

'We could all claim that, but there is a programme. At a certain time several vanish, one remains. It matters not which, does it? This method allows one to circulate better.'

'You have not yet met Amelia Underwood?'

'Not since I visited you at your ranch, my love. She is still with you?'

He decided to avoid repetition. 'Your disguise is very striking.'

'I represent a great hero of Mrs Underwood's time. A bandit king—a rogue loved by all—who came to rule a nation and was killed in his prime. It is a cycle of legend with which you must be familiar.'

'The name?'

'Ruby Jack Kennedy. Somewhere...' she cast about... 'you should find me as the treacherous woman who, in the end, betrayed him. Her name was Rosie Lee.' The Iron Orchid dropped her voice. 'She fell in love, you know, with an Italian called "The Mouser" because of the clever way he trapped his victims...'

He found this conversation more palatable and was content to lend an ear while she continued her delighted rendering of the old legend with its theme of blood, murder and revenge and the curse which fell upon the clan because of the false pride of its patriarch. He scarcely listened until there came a familiar phrase (revealing her taste for it, for she was not to know that one of her alter egos had already made it): 'Great stock is placed on authenticity, these days. Do you not feel, Jherek, that invention is being thwarted by experience? Remember how we used to stop Li Pao from giving us details of the ages we sought to re-create? Were we not wiser to do so?'

She had only half his attention. 'I'll admit that our entertainments lack something in savour for me since I journeyed through time. And, of course, I myself could be said to be the cause of the fashion you find distressing.'

She, in her own turn, had given his statements no close attention. She glared discontentedly about the hall. 'I believe they call it "social realism", she muttered.

'My "London" began a specific trend towards the re-creation of observed reality...' he continued, but she was waving a hand at him, not because she disagreed, but because he interrupted a monologue.

'It's the spirit, my pup, not the expression. Something has changed. We seem to have lost our lightness of touch. Where is our relish for contrast? Are we all to become antiquarians and nothing more? What is happening to us, Jherek? It is—darkening...'

This particular Iron Orchid's mood was very different to that of the other mother, already encountered. If she merely desired an audience while she rambled, he was happy to remain one, though he found her argument narrow.

Perhaps the argument was the only one held by this facsimile, he thought. After all, the great advantage of self-reproduction was that it was possible to hold as many different opinions as one

wished, at the same time.

As a boy, Jherek remembered, he had witnessed some dozen Iron Orchids in heated debate. She had enjoyed a phase where she found it easier to divide herself and argue, as it were, face to face, than to attempt to arrange her thoughts in the conventional manner. This facsimile, however, was proving something of a bore (always the danger, if only one opinion were held and rigorously maintained), though it had that quality which saves the bore from snubs or ostracism—and, unfortunately, encourages it to retain the idea that it is an interesting conversationalist—it had a quality of pathos.

Pathos, thought Jherek, was not normally evident in his mother's character. Had he detected it in the facsimile he had previously encountered? Possibly...

'I worship surprises, of course,' she continued. 'I embrace variety. It is the pepper of existence, as the ancients said. Therefore, I should be celebrating all these new events. These "time-warps" of Brannart's, these disappearances, all these comings and goings. I wonder why I should feel—what is it?—"disturbed" by them. Disturbed? Have you ever known me "disturbed," my egg?'

He murmured: 'Never...'

'Yes, I am disturbed. But what is the cause? I cannot identify it. Should I blame myself, Jherek?'

'Of course not...'

'Why? Why? Joy departs; Zest deserts me—and is this replacement called Anxiety! Ha! A disease of time travellers, of space voyagers, to which we, at the End of Time, have always been immune. Until now, Jherek...'

'Softest of skins, strongest of wills, I do not quite...'

'If it has become fashionable to rediscover and become infected by ancient psychoses, then I'll defy fashion. The craze will pass. What can sustain it? This news of Mongrove's? Some machination of Jagged's? Brannart's experiments?'

'Symptoms both, the latter two,' he suggested. 'If the universe is dying...'

But she had been steering towards a new subject, and again she revealed the obsession of her original. Her tone became lighter, but he was not deceived by it. 'One may also, of course, look to your Mrs Underwood as an instigator...'

The statement was given significant emphasis. There was the briefest of pauses before the name and after it. She goaded him to defend her or deny her, but he would not be lured.

Blandly he replied. 'Magnificent blossom, Li Pao would have it that the cause of our confusion lay within our own minds. He believes that we hold Truth at bay whilst embracing Illusion. The illusion, he hints, begins to reveal itself for what it is. That is why, says

Li Pao, we know concern.'

She had become an implacable facsimile. 'And you, Jherek. Once the gayest of children! The wittiest of men! The most inventive of artists! Joyful boy, it seems to me that you turn dullard. And why? And when? Because Jagged encouraged you to play Lover! To that primitive...'

'Mother! Where is your wit? But to answer, well, I am sure that we shall soon be wed. I detect a difference in her regard for me.'

'A conclusion? I exult!'

Her lack of good humour astonished him. 'Firmest of metals, do not, I pray, make a petitioner of me. Must I placate a virago when once I was assured of the good graces of a friend?'

'I am more than that, I hope, blood of my blood.'

It occurred to him that if he had rediscovered Love, then she had rediscovered Jealousy. Could the one never exist without the presence of the other?

'Mother, I beg you to recollect...'

A sniff from beneath the sombrero. 'She ascends, I see. She has her own rings, then?'

'Of course.'

'You think it wise to indulge a savage—?'

Amelia hovered close to, in earshot now. A false smile curved the lips of the shade, this imperfect doppelganger. 'Aha! Mrs Underwood. What beautiful simplicity of taste, the blue and white!'

Amelia Underwood took time to recognise the Iron Orchid. Her nod was courteous when she did so, but she refused to ignore the challenge. 'Overwhelmed entirely by the brilliant exoticism of your scarlet, Mrs Carnelian.'

A tilt of the brim. 'And what role, my dear, do you adopt today?'

'I regret we came merely as ourselves. But did I not see you earlier in that box-like costume, then later in a yellow gown of some description? So many excellent disguises!'

'I think there is one in yellow, yes. I forget. Sometimes I feel so full of rich ideas, I must indulge more than one. You must think me coarse, dear ancestor.'

'Never that, lushest of orchids.'

Jherek was amused. It was the first time he had heard Mrs Underwood use such language. He began to enjoy the encounter, but the Iron Orchid refused further sport. She leaned forward. Her son was blessed with an ostentatious kiss; Amelia Underwood was pecked. 'Brannart has arrived. I promised him an account of 1896. Surly he might be, but rarely dull. For the moment, then, dear children.'

She began to pirouette downward. Jherek wondered where she had seen Brannart Morphail, for the hunch-backed, club-footed scientist was not in evidence.

Amelia Underwood settled on his arm

again. 'Your mother seems distraught. Not as self-contained as usual.'

'It is because she divides herself too much. The substance of each facsimile is a little thin.' He explained.

'Yet it is clear that she regards me as an enemy.'

'Hardly that. She is not, you see, herself ...'

'I am complimented, Mr Carnelian. It is a pleasure to be taken seriously.'

'But I am concerned for her. She has never been serious in her life before.'

'And you would say that I am to blame.'

'I think she is perturbed, sensing a loss of control in her own destiny, such as we experienced at the Beginning of Time. It is an odd sensation.'

'Familiar enough to me, Mr Carnelian.'

'Perhaps she will come to enjoy it. It is unlike her to resist experience.'

'I should be glad to advise her on how best to cope.'

He sensed irony, at last. He darted a glance of enquiry. Her eyes laughed. He checked a desire to hug her, but he touched her hand, very delicately, and was thrilled.

'You have been entertaining them all,' he said, 'down there?'

'I hope so. Language, thanks to your pills, is no problem. I feel I speak my own. But ideas can sometimes be difficult to communicate. Your assumptions are so foreign.'

'Yet you no longer condemn them.'

'Make no mistake—I continue to disapprove. But nothing is gained by blunt denials and denunciations.'

'You triumph, as you know. It is that which the Iron Orchid finds uncomfortable.'

'I appear to be enjoying some small social success. That, in turn, brings embarrassment.'

'Embarrassment?' He bowed to O'Kala Incarnadine, as Queen Britannia, who saluted him.

'They ask me my opinion. Of the authenticity of their costumes.'

'The quality of imagination is poor.'

'Not at all. But none is authentic, though most are fanciful and many beautiful. Your people's knowledge of my age is sketchy, to say the least.'

By degrees, they were drifting towards the bottom of the hall.

'Yet it is the age we know most about,' he said. 'Mainly because I have studied it and set the fashion for it, of course. What is wrong with the costumes?'

'As costumes, nothing. But few come close to the theme of "1896." There is a span, say, of a thousand years between one disguise and another. A man dressed in lilac ducks and wearing a crusty (and I must say delicious-looking) pork pie upon his head announced that he was

Harald Hardrede.'

'The prime minister, yes?'

'No, Mr Carnelian. The costume was impossible, at any rate.'

'Could he have been this Harald Hardrede, do you think? We have a number of distinguished temporal adventurers in the menageries.'

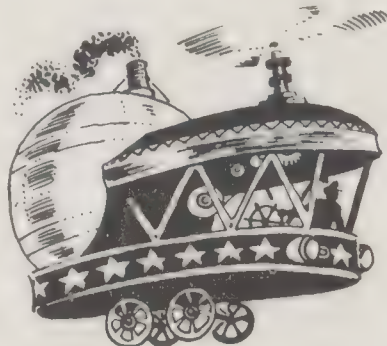
'It is unlikely.'

'Several million years have passed, after all, and so much now relies on hearsay. We are entirely dependent upon the rotting cities for our information. When the cities were younger, they were more reliable. A million years ago, there would have been far fewer anachronisms at a party of this kind. I have heard of parties given by our ancestors (your descendants, that is) which drew on all the resources of the cities in their prime. This masque must be feeble in comparison. There again, it is pleasant to use one's own imagination to invent an *idea* of the past.'

'I find it wonderful. I do not deny that I am stimulated by it, as well as confused. You must consider me narrow-minded ...'

'You praise us too much. I am overjoyed that you should find my world at last acceptable, for it leads me to hope that you will soon agree to be my—'

'Ah!' she exclaimed suddenly, and she pointed. 'There is Brannart Morphail. We must give him our news.'



A Few Quiet Moments in the Menagerie

'... And thus it was, mightiest of minds, that we returned,' concluded Jherek, reaching for a partridge tree which drifted past—he picked two fruits, one for himself and one for Mrs Underwood, at his side. 'Is the information enough to recompense for my loss of your machine?'

'Scarcely!' Brannart had added another foot or two to his hump since they had last met. Now it towered, taller than his body, tending to overbalance him. Perhaps to compensate, he had increased the size of his club foot. 'A fabrication. Your tale defies logic. Everywhere you display ignorance of the real Nature of Time.'

'I thought we brought fresh knowledge, um, professor,' said she, half distracted as she watched a crocodile of some twenty boys and girls, in identical dungarees, float past, following yet another Iron Orchid, a piping harlequin, towards the roof. Argonheart Po, huge and jolly, in a tall white chef's hat (he had come as Captain Cook), rolled in their wake, distributing edible revolvers. 'It would suggest, for instance, that it is now possible for me to return to the 19th century, without danger.'

'You still wish to return, Amelia?' What was the lurch in the region of his navel? He dissipated the remainder of his partridge.

'Should I not?'

'I assumed you were content.'

'I accept the inevitable with good grace, Mr Carnelian—that is not necessarily contentment.'

'I suppose it is not.'

Brannart Morphail snorted. His hump quivered. He began to tilt, righted himself. 'Why have you two set out to destroy the work of centuries? Jagged has always envied me my discoveries. Has he connived with you, Jherek Carnelian, to confuse me?'

'But we do not deny the truth of your discoveries, dear Brannart. We merely reveal that they are partial, that there is not one Law of Time, but many!'

'But you bring no proof.'

'You are blind to it, Brannart. We are the proof. Here we stand, immune to your undeniably exquisite but not infallible Effect. It is a fine Effect, most brilliant of brains, and applies in billions, at least, of cases— but occasionally ...'

**CONTINUED ON
PAGE 25**

THE MACHINE AT CHEVIOT CLOSE H.Q.

by Ravan Christchild



1: HEYDN HALL AND ITS ENVIRONS

Situated midway between Newhaven and Seaford, Heydn Hall has for twenty generations been the residence of the Horsley-Mitchell family. The current master, Earl Stephen, opened the house and grounds to the public in 1968, in order to supplement the family income.

Delightfully located in a 400-acre park containing a herd of fallow deer and a flock of black sheep, the house boasts an outstanding collection of both English and foreign paintings, including an extensive selection of Gainsborough, Constable and Dali (the latter housed in a new gallery built by the present Earl).

The four-storey Prince's Tower – so named after the stay of the Prince of Wales here in 1900 – has claim to another historical legend; it is said that the fourteenth Earl and Lady Newhaven committed atrocities involving over ten girls here.

House and gardens open Easter Sunday – August Bank Holiday. Adm. 15p. Chd. (under 16) 10p. Children under 12 must be accompanied by an adult. Park open May – November. Adm. 10p. Chd. (under 16) 5p. Refreshments in stables when house open.

English Country Homes and Gardens, May 1975.

The two young women strolled idly along the narrow footpath, chatting inconsequentially. The sun was not seen as such, but the whole sky-full of washy grey clouds was bright with diffused sunlight. The air was stifling hot and still, oppressive under the low veil. Woodpigeons clucked crazily away in the woods to their left.

Karen Black smiled, her pure teeth sparkling. My God, thought Catherine Carnelisan, half enviously, Karen is surely the most beautiful woman in the world. Catherine flicked her slight tongue across her smooth velvet lips, her eyelashes fluttering. Hunger washed over her.

Tossing her glossy black locks, Karen pretended not to notice the desire in Catherine's eyes. She laughed.

"What are you laughing at?" Catherine asked, laughing also, quickly taking Karen's hand in hers.

"Nothing," said Karen. "It's just a funny world, that's all."

Catherine could not understand Karen's lack of response. Deliberately she tripped and fell against the other girl. Karen still was unresponsive, though quite conscious of Catherine's charms; the scent of Fabergé Brut 33 for men smelled still more delicious on a female.

"It's a beautiful day," said Catherine desperately, "but I think it may turn to rain later."

"Steve always thought that funny," Karen agreed, regarding some youths playing football in the long grass of the park.

"He has a peculiar sense of humour, has his Lordship," observed Catherine, not quite innocently. She looked again at Karen – the sleek black hair cut and styled by a top Mayfair hairdresser, the sapphire-blue eyes which sparkled impishly in the sunlight, the perfect little nose tilted slightly upwards from the splendid red lips, the lovely swan-like neck, the big round breasts beneath the rose-patterned summer frock. Catherine permitted herself a little sigh.

"You see," Karen was explaining, "he is intrigued by the way that things change themselves into their own negatives. Weeks of heat and sunshine, such as this heatwave through which we are now passing, build up all the elements of a frightful thunderstorm, and it sometimes rains for days afterwards. As though

there is some... *force*, some unknown power in the universe which sees the balance of nature tipping too far in one direction, and acts to right it by tipping it back the other way. Like the equal and opposite reaction in physics."

"I don't know much about science," Catherine admitted, unhappy at the whole conduct of this affair, "or philosophy. I only concern myself with human things – like love."

"And *that*, my dear, is why you are doomed," Karen pronounced, laughing gaily. "And it is also why I..." She stopped, and turned to look into Catherine's deep hazel eyes.

Catherine, hearing Karen's breathing become heavier, felt a flutter in her stomach and took Karen's other hand in her own. But then Karen, a tear in her eye, nonetheless choked, looked away and began to walk on back to the house. Catherine stood still for a few startled seconds, then ran to catch up.

"Karen," she said, caution tossed aside, "Karen, I... Karen, I..."

"Come on!" Karen barked, increasing her pace. "We'll miss *Survivors*."

* * *

Johnny Terrier stood in a dark, cobwebbed corner of the cellar, his attentions divided between the ponderous leather-bound tome in his hands, and the activities of Steve Mitchell, the twentieth Earl of Newhaven, who was attempting to describe the nature of the Time Machine which occupied the centre of the room.

The machine was inactive now – the Earl had explained that it had suffered some serious, but not fatal, damage at the Battle of Waterloo. It was shaped like a giant cotton reel with a control panel attached to the central hub. Steve Mitchell moved around, in and out of the dark shadows, pointing at various items of equipment and explaining their purposes and functions in technical jargon which Terrier thought to be rather mystical.

"Of course," Mitchell concluded, pointing a finger at the mighty volume in Terrier's hands, "it's all in there. That's an extremely valuable book, you know – the only one of its kind in existence in this universe, actually. It explains in depth the various theories of time, then it goes on to describe the structure of the multiverse and how one can travel through it. There are a number of different methods, you know, and there is no agreement amongst the many time travellers whom I have met as to which is the best.

"If that book is a bit too much for you, as I suspect it might be (God, I can hardly understand a lot of it *myself*, and I have personal experience), then, if you're really at all interested you can go up to the British Museum. They've got some stuff up there which some experts believe comes from another cycle of our universe, a collection of magazines called *Fantasy Fugue*. There's some material in a few of those magazines which is amazingly accurate, considering that they were written in a period when time travel and the architecture of the multiverse had yet to be discovered. (Perhaps the writers were time travellers on the quiet, eh?) Yes, look that up when you get the time. Ha, ha!"

Terrier nodded and made an indecipherable grunting sound. Lord Mitchell (he hated the title and insisted that people call him Steve, or Mr. Mitchell. He was 43) brushed his wavy peroxide blond hair out of his eyes using his left hand in an economical movement.

"Well," he said, looking at the gold timepiece which he kept in the pocket of his purple waistcoat, secured on a delicate chain. "Well, it's about time for *Survivors*. Shall we go?"

* * *

"What's this?" asked Karen Black, peering at the 44-inch colour TV screen. She and Catherine Cernelisan had just entered the large Western Lounge. This lounge was not so called simply because it was on the western side of the building, but because Lord Newhaven (who preferred to be called by his common name, Steve Mitchell, having denounced his ancestry as a "craven collection of killers and looters"), had decorated it according to the interior design of the ranch 'Ponderosa' which he had seen on the television programme *Bonanza*. All the furniture was of varnished whitewood, the walls had been done up to look like real logs, and a good old log fire burned in a stone fireplace. Winchester and Colt firearms hung above the mantelshelf.

Mitchell and Johnny Terrier were seated in a deep sofa upholstered in genuine rawhide. Mitchell held a glass of beer in his left hand, Terrier was obviously the owner of the whisky on the little wooden table beside him. Both men were looking at the TV.

"*Survivors* has been pushed back," Mitchell explained, as Karen shut the louvred french windows softly behind them. "We're being invaded," he went on, casually.

"Invaded? What...?" The two young women moved closer to the set.

"The Germans," Terrier expanded.

"Oh..." Karen's mouth was dry. Catherine was squeezing her hand. "Which?"

"The Revolutionaries."

"God!"

They watched in silence as the TV cameras panned over a part of Southern England, showing columns of men marching across the fields, meeting little resistance. Great black and silver airships hovered in the sky above, occasionally releasing a biplane or two after refuelling. More zeppelins lay on the ground amidst billowing clouds of mustard gas, disgorging tanks and soldiers. Briefly, the viewers saw one of the airships explode silently into flame, before the screen went blank.

"This," said Steve Mitchell seriously, looking at Johnny Terrier, "will complicate matters somewhat."

Terrier nodded, thinking of the red and gold uniform in his suitcase, and the Smith & Wesson .38 in his drawer.

2: BERLIN AND ITS RUINS

Steve Mitchell lit a *Silva Thins* and grimaced at the emaciated visage in the Pepsi-Cola mirror. His unruly hair hung in greasy strips down his thin, pale face, out of which stared small withdrawn eyes. And those watery eyes looked at him and worried him with their indifference and lack of vitality. They looked behind him at the sick woman lying naked on the bed in her own filth, her monotonous sobbing now so long sustained that the sound of her suffering failed to register on his consciousness.

He looked back into his own eyes and felt ill. There was an ugly noise as the woman's body cleared itself. Steve Mitchell stood up, taking the Webley .38 revolver from the mantelshelf. Idly, he aimed at her sweating head. His finger tightening on the trigger, he decided that he would kill her now, then himself, and thereby bring the peace which would otherwise come only after an eternity of suffering and emotional torture.

He pulled the trigger and there was a loud click from the empty chamber, but not loud enough to disturb the beetles clambering over the dung in her bed.

* * *

"What failed us was a lack of moral integrity, of principles, of... backbone, was the word they used in the old days."

Steve Mitchell lay on the great four poster bed in what had been Hitler's room in the Chancellery. He was smoking a *Silva Thins* cigarette, using his naked, hairless chest as an ashtray.

Karen Black made no reply. She was brushing what had once been her silky hair, until they had run out of shampoo. Between her teeth she held a hairclip, ready to insert once she'd got the roller in, which she held between the thumb and forefinger of her right hand. She watched her lover in the Pepsi-Cola mirror as he reflected upon the nature of existence, unconsciously stroking himself behind the genitals. *That*, Karen thought, cynically, is the nature of existence.

"We should never have left Heydn Hall," she said, the clip still in her mouth. "We were all right there."

"We couldn't have stayed very long, K. England was getting over-run by communards and immigrants — especially after the bomb in New South Africa. The Time Machine, as you know, needed a complete overhaul, by an expert — which I couldn't give it."

She fixed one roller, then began on another one. "We should've tried harder to find Sebastian Dorrell. He could have helped."

Mitchell sneered. "How? Don't be stupid, my dear. Sebastian Dorrell at the time was on his vegetable-growing kick. I spoke to him over the telephone about ten days before we left the country — four days before he disappeared. I couldn't get him to talk about anything else. For half an hour he was telling me how to dig a trench and fill it with leaves and half-rotten stable manure for growing marrows. I tried to change the subject, of course, but then he went on to tell me about rotating his peas and cabbages with his carrots and parsnips. Quite an unhealthy obsession, I thought. He was living in a world of his own with his beloved vegetables. I could tell I wouldn't get any sense out of him while the craze lasted."

"But, surely, sheer self-preservation would have caused him to snap out of it?"

Mitchell, sitting on the side of the bed, shrugged. "Maybe. But Dorrell was quite capable of switching off self-preservation if it suited his mood."

"Yes," Karen said, smiling reminiscently. "He was a very good actor, Sebastian. I'm surprised he never made the stage."

"He got into Parliament. It's the same thing."

Mitchell lurched up off the bed, a slight depression where his six-foot, 162 pound body had been. Karen Black, herself once hailed by every magazine and newspaper columnist as "The Most Beautiful Woman in the World", admired his lean, sun-bronzed frame as he moved to one of the arched windows. His muscles were hard and firm, and he had plenty of meat on him. He moved with the nimbleness of an athlete, and he loved with the energy and stamina of one. His body, with the exception of his head, was completely hairless, and this excited her. She got up and moved towards him, discarding her satin robe with its exotic oriental embroidery.

"Once upon a time," Mitchell began as Karen stood nude beside him, looking out across the crumbled city, "the sun on these fallen towers would burn our eyes. Do you remember?"

She nodded, her eyes fixed beyond the horizon, on something she wished to be there.

"Now the weeds have taken over, and the fronds. Soon, Berlin will be the centre of a jungle which will spread throughout Europe."

"It always has been," Karen observed.

They stood in silence for a while, touching each other. Mitchell wondered whether he should tell her of his dream, the dream which had lately been recurring night after night. The dream disturbed him, and he feared that he was becoming schizophrenic, or paranoid.

"Let's go for a walk," Karen suggested. So they went out and walked naked in the Chancellery gardens and he made love to her by the pond which had once contained fish but now only empty Coke cans. After doing this, Mitchell cried aloud while Karen failed to soothe him.

"You're becoming morbid, Steve," she told him later, as they ate baked beans cold from the unlabelled tins.

"And what should I be so happy about?"

"Well, we're here now, aren't we? So we might as well make the most of it."

"If only . . . if only we had been strong, K. We could've done it, you know. Could have won. Nothing's predetermined, is it? It's what we do that counts."

Karen took his face in her hands. Thinking she was about to kiss him, Mitchell dropped the can of beans on to the carpet and seized her, pulling her to him. There was tomato sauce, thick and sickly, all over her lips as he kissed her with all the passion in his soul.

Outside, the wind howled across the bleak ruins, and a few drops of rain began to fall.

3: PORTMEIRION AND ITS TOWERS

"It's all changing," complained Electra Vanderpump. "And mostly for the worst."

They were sitting in Sebastian Dorrell's car, a yellow and chestnut Delage DSS 100, having just played twenty-seven holes at Harlech, and were looking across the placid grey waters of Tremadoc Bay at the city of Portmeirion. Dorrell himself felt a twinge of heavy nostalgia at the sight of destruction. The pleasant town which he had known since childhood had been wiped out, annihilated, completely removed from the face of the planet Earth as surely as if Dorrell had done the job himself, with his portable disintegrator Mk 2. In its place was a shining heap of towers and rusty girderwork, iron and concrete running all in straight lines and joining in grotesque geometrically square angles.

"God," he murmured, for the thirtieth time since their arrival on the scene.

Electra Vanderpump nodded and searched in the black and gold *Biba* carrier bag for a cheese and tomato sandwich. She found one, and began to munch it, squinting through her sunglasses. The new Portmeirion seemed to be growing as they watched. A monolithic building, with a tall triangular roof, had appeared on the west of the city, which she could have sworn had not been there five minutes ago. She mentioned the fact to Dorrell.

"Mm," he grunted, apparently agreeing with her. Strange, but since taking on the responsibility of Liberal Member of Parliament for Hertfordshire S.W., Dorrell seemed to be a much more agreeable person all round.

"I've noticed it too, Electra," he expanded. "It's disturbing, isn't it? No human technology could achieve such an incredible rate of construction."

Electra looked at him alarmedly, but his gaze was focused upon an apparently innocuous rowing boat which had just come into view in the bay, approaching from the direction of Criccieth. It was far too distant for the cognizance of details, and after a minute or so, when the boat had become shrouded in sea-mist, Sebastian Dorrell began to stare once again at Portmeirion, where another three minaret-like structures had appeared in the centre of the city.

* * *

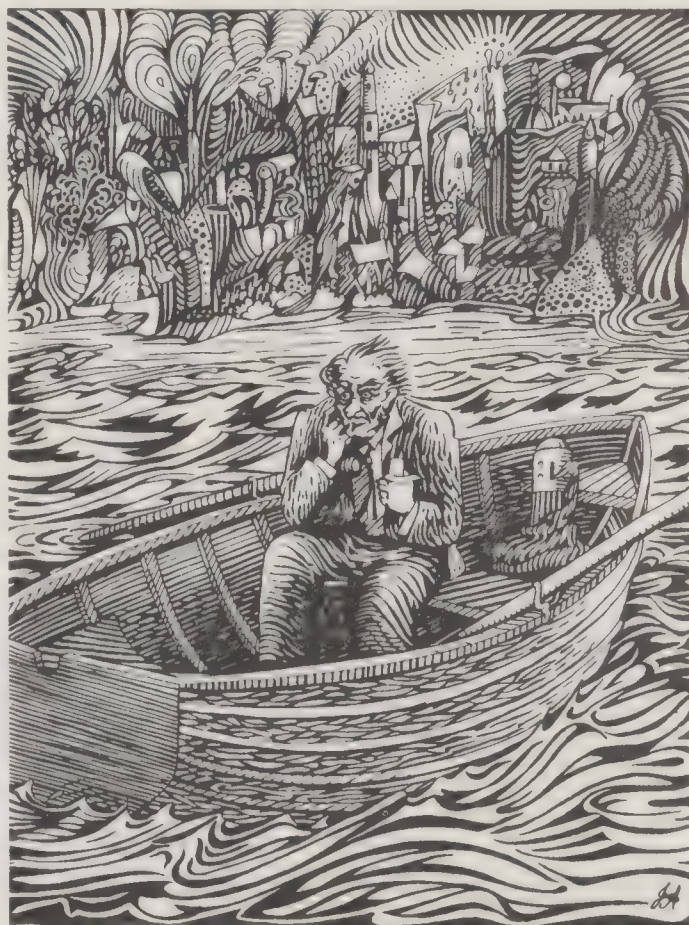
Dr. Meyrick Enzius tugged on the oars. His ruddy face dripped sweat as he panted laboriously, a raucous, grating sound, cursing between the deep breaths. He surveyed the lovely surroundings with a contemptuous sneer, paying particular concern to the ugly structure going up at Portmeirion, which he rather liked.

Now he was approximately in the middle of the bay, and with a fierce snort, he pushed the oars aside. Snarling, and thus exposing his large teeth, broken and decaying, he spat into the sea, then reached inside the shabby brown sports-jacket to produce a bar of Cadbury's chocolate fudge. Peeling off the cellophane film covering, he began to suck at the sweet.

Why, he brooded, did he always wind up on the side of evil? He was not, himself, a cruel or malevolent individual – cynical, perhaps, but his past had made him – yet by some malicious turn of fate, he forever turned up working for someone who was.

Kicking the cylindrical object which lay in the bow of the boat, wrapped in oily rags, Enzius swore and began to pick at a nasty boil on the back of his neck.

* * *



Sebastian Dorrell got out of the car without a word to Electra, and moved round to the back. She strained her neck to watch him open the boot and tug out a large, heavy wireless set.

"I thought we might listen to some music," he explained as he sat beside her, placing the machine on his lap and beginning to crank it furiously.

The music which came from the set was the 1812 Overture by Tchaikovsky, and was just coming to its conclusion. Napoleon's broken army was staggering back across the steppes, shattered and demoralised, the failure of the progressive French to overthrow feudal Tsarism paving the way for the First World War in 1904.

As Moscow's bells rang out in victorious rapture, the overture was faded out, and a man's voice came in.

"This in the BBC Home Service. The News.

"German revolutionists landing by parachute in the South of England have been arrested by members of the Home Guard and the Police. Forged documents which would have enabled them to penetrate British security organisations were taken from the paratroopers, as well as quantities of counterfeit pound notes and coppers. The greatest find, though, is a list of names which the police believe to be the enemy's contacts in Britain.

"The TUC leaders met with Mr. Gladstone at 10 Downing Street today and informed him that there will be a general cessation of work starting at twelve midnight tonight. Our reporter says that the men were visibly frightened by the mood of their men, and this is probably why they have taken this action.

"Mr. John Lennon, of the 'Beatles' jazz-band, has been found dead at his Kensington home. Mr. Lennon's apartment on the Bayswater Road was broken into by police after his friend, the American Negro tap-dancer, Mr. Robert Dylan, became disturbed at not having seen him for several days. Mr. Lennon's death is unexplained at the moment; police say that no dangerous drugs were found in the apartment.

"A letter bomb was delivered to Alastair Burnet, television personality and former editor of the *Daily Express*, yesterday. He called the police when he saw Indian stamps on the envelope. The letter was sent last week to his address in Glasgow and was forwarded to his Kensington, London, home. Experts defused the package.

"A raid by police on a council house in Bushey, Hertfordshire, early this morning, resulted in the arrest of a young woman. A police spokesman said later that the raid had not yielded satisfactory results. A quantity of literature was taken away, as well as a large amount of scientific and laboratory equipment.

"Sport, and rain has stopped play at Lords. The West Indies, in their first innings, are 206 for two. In Mexico, the Chinese have beaten Team America by four goals to one.

"That's the news at eleven, we'll be back at midday with the latest car crash results from Los Angeles. Now, over to Kenneth Everett in the music studio."

While a jingle played stupidly on the wireless, Sebastian Dorrell chewed a tomato which Electra held to his lips.

"Odd," he commented, having eaten all the tomato, "that they never mentioned this development here." He pointed at the tasteless chaos of steel and gleam that was Portemirion.

"Perhaps they want to keep it quiet?" Electra Vanderpump suggested, her Polaroids misty.

4: CALCUTTA AND ITS ARMY HUTS

Captain John Terrier hobbled along a dusty path towards the creosoted wooden hut which contained the office of General Lord Frank Giles, commander-in-chief of the British forces in India. Terrier sucked the left of his lower lip and wondered why the General wanted to see him.

Terrier was in a dilemma. He wanted to resign his commission and go to America where a job awaited him with his uncle's company, Black's Shipbuilders Co. Ltd. The firm specialised in making houseboats and small pleasure craft such as cabin cruisers. There was a great market for these in the States, as America was just entering the Golden Age of Leisure and Highlife, which was shortly to be followed by the Dark Age of Chaos and War between the years 1983 – 2076.

If he did take the job with Black's, Terrier was fairly certain that in ten years' time he would be a half-millionaire. Yet his conscience kept complaining that he could not desert his country at a time like this, not when it needed him most. The streets of London were in turmoil, the universities were occupied by students rebelling and rioting, the colonies were a powder-keg and those officers and politicians capable of looking at the situation in a cool, astute way, knew that the spark which would ignite that powder-keg was looming nearer and nearer.

Terrier's problem then, was the essential one which confronts us all at some time; was he to do what he *wanted* to do, or what he thought he *should* do? He had changed his mind twenty or thirty times during the past week; but sooner or later he had to make a decision.

However, he could not make that decision right now. He was at the office block. Pushing open a door, he entered and made his way to the office which was signposted "Reception".

"Yes," growled the corporal from behind the desk. Looking up, he added: "Sir."

"Captain Terrier, to see General Giles."

The corporal nodded and picked up a telephone. He mumbled a few words, then replaced the receiver and said to Captain Terrier, "The General's office is at the end of the corridor, sir."

"Thank you, corporal."

* * *

General Giles was seated in a mahogany chair between a mahogany desk and an open window. To the right of him as Terrier entered the office was a major, standing at ease against the wall.

Terrier stepped forward, shutting the door behind him, and came smartly to attention, saluting the General.

General Giles opened his mouth to speak, but the words came instead from the other officer.

"Thank you, Captain Terrier, for warning us that the General's life was in danger. You might already know that we have apprehended the guerrillas who were to make the attempt. The Empire is saved, at least for another few months.

"Now, we come to the rather more delicate subject of Her Ladyship, the Countess Caroline of Warwick. Namely, the General's wife. We feel . . ."

Major Cox broke off as General Giles cleared his throat and began to speak.

"Let me tell him."

Cox nodded.

"Caroline was a lovely woman," the General murmured reminiscently, his eyes watering. "As God is my witness, I never loved a woman as much as I loved her. My life was dull and

routine until I met her. She and her friends brought a ray of sunshine into my life."

Terrier shifted uneasily. He knew what the General meant. "And now," Giles continued, "now she is gone. But, I had lost her anyway. Hadn't I, Terrier?"

Captain Terrier found that he was biting his lower lip. He desisted this activity, and considered the General's expression and general demeanour. There was no passion in Giles's face, as one might have expected. Rather, he seemed totally detached from reality, as if he were describing a mere dream and not the destruction of a dear, loved one.

"We have decided to send you on a special mission, Captain Terrier," said Major Cox, and General Giles repeated, "...a special mission. Tell him."

The major nodded. "You . . ."

"A special mission," interrupted Giles. "Caroline." He began to cry into his handkerchief.

"You will lead a special group of infants and engineers into the Himalayas, to Katmandu, and you will commence the construction of a railway linking India to Northern China. The Indo-Chinese rebels are hovering menacingly near the Burma Road, you see, and we must open an alternative route to the Chinese lest the Road is cut."

Captain Terrier stared aghast at his superior officers. "But what about —"

"the Kahn? Oh, we're sure that you can handle that ruffian, Captain. As I said, we'll give you a company of infantry."

"A company? But — but it'll take a brigade, at least, to give my engineers the protection they need. It can't be done, sir."

"Terrier!" Major Cox barked, "we are not interested in what you think *can* be done and what cannot. We know only the necessity that this railway *must* be built. And built fast."

"I'm no engineer," Terrier retorted, knowing that he was fighting for his life.

"You will have two platoons of the best engineers in India."

"I resign my commission!"

"We will consider this resignation after you return."

"It's murder."

The major shrugged. "We call it the 'X-factor'."

5: QUEBEC AND ITS PALACE OF EXILES

"Hello, tasty Meyrick," said Sebastian Dorrell gleefully, clapping Meyrick Enzius on a wart-encrusted shoulder and causing the man to squirm. Meyrick Enzius, the ugliest person whom Sebastian Dorrell had ever had the fortune to meet, made a sickening attempt at a smile — more like a grimace.

Sebastian was wearing a light blue linen suit and his Bushey Grammar School tie. He waved at Archduke Bronstein, whom he knew briefly from the United Nations, where he had once attended a party given by Stalin (now the Archduke's mortal enemy) to celebrate the collapse of the hated South African Racialist Oligarchy.

"Now then, Meyrick, my cherub," he continued mockingly, lightly touching up the exiled Queen Anne II of England as she drifted past, shouting, "Here Doublet! Here, Goodwill! Here, Mark!" The lovely girl was quite mad, of course, but then, it was the only way out.

"Shall we continue our discussion of yesterday?" Sebastian asked of Meyrick Enzius, "so that we can come to some agreement about our mutual experiences?"

Enzius' reply was to pull a folded copy of a pamphlet from the pocket of his jacket. It was *Portmeirion: A Colourmaster Guide*. Another magazine appeared to have been folded inside this, for as Enzius opened the pages, it fell to the marble mosaic floor. Dorrell picked it up and raised his eyebrows as he scanned the cover.

The Magazine was the third edition of *Fantasy Fugue*, the best magazine of science fiction, fantasy, and speculative fiction which had ever been produced in Britain — the Britain, however, of an alternative universe. In this universe, it was published under the slightly less imaginative title of *Vortex* and had a slightly different format.

"How did you come by this?" Sebastian asked, joyfully, flicking through the glossy pages. He stopped briefly to read paragraphs of *The First Of All Great Canticles* by Michelle Moonrock, and also from *The Pleasures Of Timelessness* by Ravinmad Christian. He smiled.

"They don't make them like this any more," he said, handing the magazine back to Meyrick Enzius. "Never have, in fact," he added philosophically.

Enzius scuttled off, farting loudly as he went, and Sebastian Dorrell took up a more serious pursuit of Queen Anne.

* * *

"... so I should be more than honoured if your Majesty would deign to come to my apartments this evening for some dinner."

The Queen looked through Sebastian with vacant eyes. Her jaw quivered for some time, and he realised that she was still in a state of political shock and its ensuing mental disorientation.

"Have you got some horsy pictures?" she asked suddenly.

Sebastian frowned. "Well," he said, dubiously, "I might have." He doubted whether his three copies of *Animal Orgy* and one innocently named *Animal Lover* were quite what she had in mind.

"I have," he told her, "a collection of London Telephone Directories from 1960 onwards. I thought I'd save them for posterity, you see."

"I'm hungry."

"My room is on the third floor."

* * *

"Some of us knew it was coming," Sebastian informed her as he got stuck in to his third chocolate mint glory. "Of course, we were caught unawares by the speed of events, like most were — even those elements who were consciously engineering the collapse."

He looked at the young woman with pity in his eyes. She had only been a Queen for three days before the monarchy was overthrown. Sebastian himself was not exactly a monarchist, but nor was he an anti-monarchist. He simply did not regard the existence of the institution as being an important issue in politics. He knew that this placed him in the firing line of both sides, but this he ignored.

"You see, we had to achieve the Perfect World. Yet in the course of the Great Revolution which was the first step into that world, the Lords of Chaos interfered and now the battle is being waged between Order and Chaos, and I believe that the world will be destroyed, consumed in the fires of this great conflict. Your Majesty . . . but I apologise, Your Majesty. I am upsetting you."

Queen Anne was weeping, great big tears falling from her lovely eyes on to his Afghan rug.

"It was thoughtless of me to discuss political issues with all their distressing personal implications to yourself. Oh, what a cad you must think me. And yet, I have an urge to talk . . ."

"Then talk to me, Sebastian, my blood."

Sebastian Dorrell whirled round in his chair, knocking over the chocolate mint glory and smashing the glass. Queen Anne looked up from her cushion on the floor, and her eyes widened.

The woman in the doorway wore a slinky lamé dress which clung to her slim figure. Her legs crossed, she leaned seductively on the jamb, smoke curling from the long cigarette holder in her right hand. Her hair curling loosely around the line of her jaw, Electra Vanderpump smiled warmly. She's wearing gold lipstick, Sebastian thought. A nice touch.

"Hello, Electra. When did you get here?"

"Not so long ago," she informed him, moving cat-like into the room. Sebastian noticed that Queen Anne cringed away from Electra and wondered what the Vanderpump woman meant to Her Majesty.

"I've been chatting for about forty minutes, I suppose. Some delightful friends you have here, Sebastian," she said, smiling at Queen Anne with just a hint of mischief in her expression. "I simply asked for asylum, and — hey presto! — here I am."

"I thought the Cornish had got you," Sebastian continued conversationally.

"Heaven forbid, no! I was fleeing the West Country, you see, when the whole system just completely collapsed. Well, there I was, all in a quandary, not knowing what to do, when guess who I met? Steve Mitchell," she prattled on, not stopping for breath. "He and that delightful little dolly Karen were heading towards London, with a truck load of Germans in tow. Well, he — Lord Newhaven, that is — told me that emergency flights were leaving Brighton for America and Canada. So — here is where I am, and here is where I shall stay. For a while, at least."

She sat down after making this little speech, and Sebastian offered her a drink. She accepted a ginger beer and lemon, and smiled another of her feline smiles at Queen Anne.

"Have you two met before?" Sebastian asked of Electra, who licked her lips in relish of the memory.

"Once," she explained; "when she was only a Princess, fourth in line to the throne. Sorry about Charles," she said directly to the Queen, who turned her head away. "I meant to get that treacherous little vixen he was consorting with."

This proved too much for Queen Anne, who stood up, mounted an imaginary horse and galloped away into a bedroom.

"Oh dear," lamented Electra, "I've upset her now."

Sebastian shook his head slightly. He wondered whether Her Majesty would enjoy the *Animal Orgy's* which she would discover in that room. He moved closer to the deliciously sexy woman in the chair. She reeked of Chanel No. 5.

"Electra, my peacock. It's been so long since . . ."

"Mmm," she groaned as she pressed her lips to his, not caring about the porter who stood, spectating, in the doorway. As Sebastian's tongue licked the inside of her golden lips, she undid his belt.

"Jove!" he exclaimed, pulling his mouth from hers and proceeding to unbutton her dress. "What beautiful lips you have, Electra, my orgasm. What carat?"

She made no reply, smiling at the expression on his face when he saw her beautiful breasts. Each delicious nipple was ringed with glittering diamonds.

6: NEWHAVEN AND ITS STATELY HOME

The sound of boots scrunching on the gravel drive awoke Karen Black, not a heavy sleeper. Her eyes opened immediately, and she looked at her watch. It was four in the morning. Karen climbed out of bed and, kneeling naked upon the counterpane, she peered carefully out of the window.

Karen gasped as, in the bright moonlight, she saw ten to fifteen men, all uniformed and armed, moving around outside. Staring hard at one man, she realised that they were trained soldiers, and not English.

A light was shining from the dungeons in the East Wing, which meant that her employer and lover, Steve Mitchell, was up and about — unless he had fallen asleep over his work, which was unusual but not completely unknown. Hurriedly Karen began to get dressed, and as she did so, she heard the doorbell ring. When the bell was not answered immediately — the servants, of course, were still asleep — one of the soldiers began hammering on the door.

"All right, all right, I'm coming." This was Steve Mitchell's voice, and judging by its growling tone, Karen guessed that these men, armed or not, would have a rough reception. She went out into the corridor and along to the landing, from where she could see the front door.

Steve Mitchell and Pitkin, the butler, reached the door simultaneously, the servant attired in a corded dressing gown, his employer in a pair of Levi's and white tee-shirt. In his right hand, Mitchell had a 9mm Browning automatic pistol. This was uncharacteristic of him, for the 20th Earl had denounced the warlike activities of his ancestors, and was a founding member of the now-dissolved Pacifist League.

Mitchell allowed Pitkin to open the door, placing himself in a position where he could surprise and disarm anyone entering. But the soldiers outside were too sharp for this, despite the cold, two of them bursting through as soon as the butler had unlocked the door. Karen started at the loud, almost simultaneous, reports as Mitchell fired at the soldier nearest him, and the man fired back.

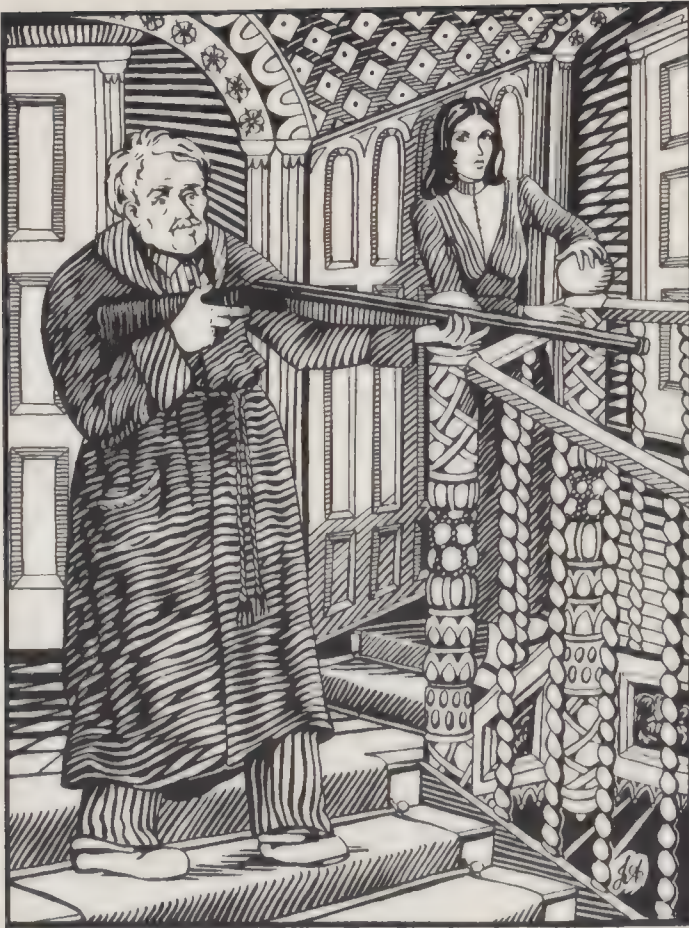
By now the entire household had awakened, and was cowering at the top of the stairs, watching the incredible scene below. Whatever lay behind this activity must be something big for her lover to decide to wield a gun.

Steve Mitchell had been shot in the leg, and the reception hall was filling up with soldiers. They came in out of the cold night and started to roam about as if in their own barracks, stamping and spitting everywhere. Karen watched with a sense of detached unreality, as though dreaming. The eyes of her companions on the landing were all fixed upon the activity below, as one of the soldiers glanced up the stairs and saw them.

He guffawed obscenely, and pointed. Ten different heads turned up to leer at the female bodies attired in negligees and dressing gowns. The men's eyes spoke for themselves as they began to advance up the stairs. Some of the women screamed.

Mr. Cephas Drew, an elderly gentleman of portly build with a thinning moustache, appeared on the landing. He was armed with an elephant gun, which he pointed at the soldiers.

"Get back," he warned. "I know how to use this." They kept on coming, refusing to fear an old fool like him, Karen watched, fascinated, as his right forefinger curled around the trigger, tightening with painful slowness. The discharge from the gun startled the rest, but Karen's eyes gleamed as the heavy shot flew from the oily barrel, to take the leading soldier in the chest. A look of incredulity appeared on his face as he fell back, his



hands vainly attempting to stem the spread of scarlet bloom across his chest. His comrades turned their heads to watch his body crash to the floor, then regarded Cephas Drew, who was just recovering from the recoil.

"There's still another barrel," he said, "who's going to get it?"

This question was never to be answered as an authoritative voice barked from the hall:

"Desist!"

Karen hadn't noticed this man enter. He wore the same uniform as the others, but appeared to be an officer.

"Where is Earl Newhaven?"

Mitchell limped forward, pressing a hand against the bloody flesh-wound on his thigh, ignoring the NCO who had been guarding him.

"I am Stephen Mitchell, 20th Earl of Newhaven. What is the meaning of this intrusion, this — obscene — conduct? And who are you, sir?"

"Bring him into the drawing room." The officer spoke English with an aristocratic Etonian accent. But what was he doing in the uniform of the German Revolutionary People's Army?

As Steve Mitchell was pushed roughly into his own drawing room, Karen came to the inevitable conclusion that she was *not* dreaming.

Cephas Drew stood at the top of the stairs, elephant gun in his limp hand, not knowing what to do.

* * *

"Do not play games with people's lives, my friend," said the renegade officer, who had announced that his name was Willard Joyce, and that he was a natural Englishman who had been educated at St. Paul's and Cambridge.

Joyce carelessly placed the barrel of his gun on Karen Black's soft breast.

"Your lovely — secretary? — shall be the first to go. Then your friend, here" — he waved the Colt .45 at Johnny Terrier, who was seated — "who we found in your laboratory ready to do some poor unfortunate a bad turn with nitric acid. He is obviously a psychopath. Yet, although he probably deserves to die, we shall let him live — if you help us locate, and then control, the Conjunction. You see, we are reasonable men."

"If you were reasonable men," Mitchell argued, "I could reason with you. As it is . . ."

"I tire of this!" Joyce shouted, sharply and suddenly, upsetting his own men. "Do you still insist that you know not what a Conjunction is — or how to locate one — or how to control it?"

Mitchell nodded despondently. "I swear it. I . . ." There was a loud ripping sound as Karen Black's dress was torn from her. Willard held it in his hand, looking at Mitchell without expression, and this lack of expression was the most menacing countenance that Mitchell had ever seen.

Joyce went on to remove all of Karen's garments except her knickerbockers.

"I shall have her first," he said calmly, "and then she shall be passed around amongst my men. They have not had women for almost two months, you know. That does terrible things to the libido. I guarantee that she will die, sir, in this degrading fashion, unless you pledge us your assistance."

Mitchell bit his lip. How could he make a decision like this? These people must not learn the engineering of the multiverse, for they were not yet ready for that knowledge. In their ignorance, he knew that they could wipe out the whole universe in a blink.

He considered the situation objectively, trying to pay as little regard as possible to his own wishes and emotions.

"I told you," he said. "I don't know what the hell you're talking about." He turned his face so that he was not looking at Karen when he said it, and when she cried his name in protest. As he studied the painting of his great uncle, Lord Charles Parking-Horsley-Mitchell, he tried to ignore the ripping of her pants.

"Steve . . ." she cried, but he knew what he had to do.

Then Johnny Terrier was on his feet, but Mitchell turned round first, and said, "All right. Let her go. I'll help you."

He touched Terrier's hand, on his shoulder.

"Oh, the agony which the responsibility of knowledge brings."

7: LONDON AND ITS PALAIS DE DANCE

"We have the East End, Comrade."

Kieran O'Hara nodded gravely. "Good," he said. "We'll be able to wrap this up pretty soon, I reckon."

"The enemy are falling apart," his comrade, a tall, plump woman, told him.

"It's moved bloody fast, Anna."

"Yes," she agreed. "Almost too fast."

The headquarters of the revolution had been established in

the Hammersmith Palais, which was now full of armed civilians on guard duty or resting between patrols, and men and women, most of them young, moving restlessly about the great hall engaged in animated political discussions.

O'Hara felt a nervous twitch developing in his left eye. It was the third time that day.

* * *

Sitting in his flat in Ladbroke Grove, Notting Hill, Mordok watched with consummate ecstasy the flickering lights and the fluctuating fluid levels in their coloured chambers. He rubbed two of his hands together while the other reached out to stroke the large black-and-white cat which seemed to have made its home here with him.

"Soon, Kitty," he promised the animal, "soon you shall live in a palace, amidst the burning human garbage of the Earth. You are safe with the forces of Chaos, Kitty. When Chaos rules the Earth, there shall always be a home for the rats, who shall get fatter by the day. And while the rats are here, then, so will be the cats, eh? I think that we should make you President of the Cats, you know."

* * *

"A disturbing report has just come through from North Wales, Comrade. It's fantastically unbelievable, actually."

"If it's just some idealist fantasy. . ."

"Shall I read it?"

O'Hara nodded. "If you think it important, Comrade, then read it."

The young man nodded and coughed nervously. He held the piece of telex paper up and read from it, although he knew the contents of the message by heart. It said:

UNEXPLAINABLE CATASTROPHE AT
PORTMEIRION. ENTIRE VILLAGE HAS
DISAPPEARED. NEW CONSTRUCTION OF A
GROTESQUE METALLIC MESS PROCEEDING AT AN
INCREDIBLE, IN FACT, IMPOSSIBLE RATE. REPEAT,
CONSTRUCTION RATE IS HUMANLY IMPOSSIBLE.

O'Hara frowned. He scratched his chin and turned to the three comrades seated around the table behind him. "Did you hear that?" he asked.

They all nodded.

"It's odd. But what can we do? We'll have to wait till the revolution's over, then we'll sort it out."

The three men, all members of the Political Committee, nodded and went on with their Chinese chequers.

8: BATCHWORTH HEATH AND ITS PUBLIC HOUSE

"I need to urinate," Steve Mitchell protested.

"Me, too," said Johnny Terrier, complicating matters. They had just come through Windsor, where Willard Joyce's contacts in the British insurrectionary organisation had proved decisively helpful in preventing their heads being shot off.

They were driving for Bushey, the small town in South-West Hertfordshire where Steve Mitchell had once shared a laboratory complex with the long-lost Meyrick Enzius. In Mitchell's Rolls-Royce Silver Cloud were Mitchell and Terrier, as well as Willard Joyce and Karen Black.

Joyce sat thoughtfully in the back of the car, finger on his

lip, Luger 9mm automatic aimed casually at Karen's thigh.

"Very well," he said at length, "stop at the next convenience."

"I'll stop here," Mitchell said. "The hedge is pretty thick. I'm busting, you know."

"All right, then. But don't try anything. Remember I have Miss Black."

"My bladder's a bit full itself," Karen lied plainly.

"I suggest you hurry back," Joyce told the two men as Mitchell pulled the car into the side of the road, "Miss Black is not too safe with me."

Steve Mitchell looked threateningly at Joyce, but said nothing, and got out of the car. Together, he and Terrier struggled through the brambly hedgerow.

"Where are we?" Terrier asked, not really wanting to excrete anything. Mitchell did, however, and he began spraying the hedge as he said: "A place called Batchworth Heath. Bushey's only about five miles from here."

"Mr. Mitchell, do we have to lead this despicable traitor to your old headquarters?"

"What would you suggest, Mr. Terrier? A stand-up fight? Miss Black would be injured, and I fancy that Joyce would enjoy the task of inflicting punishment upon us by torturing her. No, sir, that is not the way. Besides, I have a desire to see this Conjunction myself."

"I must say," Terrier condescended, "that, after what you told me in your laboratory this evening, I am rather keen to see it as well. It's all too incredible for words. I can hardly believe your explanation — not that I doubt your word, of course. I am a fairly simple man, Mr. Mitchell."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that," Mitchell said, mysteriously. "I wonder," he mused, zipping his trousers, "if we can stop it before it gets too. . ." He broke off suddenly, and stared across the heath. In the sky above Ye Olde Greene Manne a soft green light had appeared, fluctuating like a fluid. This green light shone down upon a tall, metallic framework which was actualising itself about the public house.

"Oh, Christ!" Mitchell cursed. "That's fucked our goose. Come on, sir, we must hurry now. We have very little time."

But he had to tug at Terrier's coat sleeve, for the man was staring at the impossible sight, as the metal structure grew until it crushed Ye Olde Greene Manne.

"What was that?" Terrier asked, as they sped towards South Oxhey.

"That, Mr. Terrier, was a Conjunction. A hole in the universe. It means trouble. The Lords will start coming through in about ten hours time — maybe more, maybe less."

Terrier shook his head and was speechless. Willard Joyce gulped and tightened his grip on the Luger. Karen Black bit her lovely lip.

Steve Mitchell pushed the accelerator on to the floor and the car lurched forward at 110, in a race against time for the survival of the world, the solar system and perhaps even the universe.

9: BUSHEY AND ITS COUNCIL HOUSES

The tyres squealed as Steve Mitchell turned the Silver Cloud into Cheviot Close, opening his door even before applying the handbrake. The four got out of the car and ran down the road to Number 4, Willard Joyce ensuring that he kept hold of Karen Black's wrist.

Mitchell inserted his key into the lock, but before he was able to turn it, the door opened. Rita Coffin, *sans spectacles*, was wearing pink floral pyjamas and uncombed curly hair. She smiled a weak greeting and stood back to allow them in. Her eyes gave Mitchell the impression that she had just woken up.

"Cup of tea?" Rita offered. Mitchell nodded in affirmation and they walked through into the kitchen. He noticed that the door which led to the subterranean laboratory complex was ajar, and that a crack of light shone through.

While Rita Coffin waited for the kettle to boil, she informed the others of her recent adventures, leading up to the police raid on Cheviot Close H.Q. in which she had been arrested. This latest event had occurred only that morning; she had been released due to lack of evidence.

Willard Joyce did not seem too interested in Rita's carryings-on, he kept alternating his gaze from ceiling to floor to Karen Black, to ceiling, to floor, and Rita wondered as to the nature of his relationship to Karen, or to any of them.

"Emm, Rita, I would like to introduce you to Mr. John Terrier, who has until recently been an officer in the Army."

Rita smiled at Johnny Terrier, then looked again at Joyce, as Mitchell introduced the latter:

"And this is the joyful Oberst Joyce, German revolutionary. He's a traitor, you know."

Joyce smiled sheepishly, almost apologetically. "I am a progressive, you see, madame. And Britain is not. So, I fight for progress against this reactionary country."

Rita nodded. She was probably the only person apart from himself who understood Joyce's feelings, having been that way herself at one period.

"Kettle."

Rita Coffin switched off the kettle and poured the boiling water into a porcelain teapot.

"Rita," Mitchell said, "has anyone been downstairs?"

"Yes," she answered, pulling a crocheted tea-cosy over the pot. "The police were here, of course. They took a lot of gear away, but I don't think they touched any of the important stuff."

"I don't suppose the ignorant bastards knew what they were looking for."

"And also that guy who was here once. He murmured his name, but I'm afraid that I was high as a kite. I think he's still down there, actually."

Mitchell raised his eyebrows. "Here before, you say? Now, who. . . Oh no! Not *him*!"

Sebastian Dorrell had appeared from below ground, emerging through the larder door. He was wearing a top hat of grey silk, a dark velvet double breasted frock-coat and narrow trousers which were a trifle short. In his left hand he twirled a black, silver topped swagger-stick.

"Hello," he said, being friendly.

"Who is this?" Willard Joyce wanted to know.

"I am Sabastian Dorrell, Member of Parliament for this constituency. And who, sir, are you?"

"Oh, he's just a slimy traitor," Johnny Terrier said, vehemently.

"Ah, a traitor, eh? I would not bandy that fact about too much, if I were you," Dorrell advised Joyce, helpfully.

"Mr. Joyce has kidnapped us," Steve Mitchell told Dorrell. "He insists that we help him, or else he will damage Karen."

"Oh dear," said Dorrell, "and what does he want you to do, my peachy friend?"

"We have detected a 'Conjunction' somewhere in England," Joyce cut in. "We know that certain extremely powerful forces

will be manifested in this area. We intend to harness those forces to our own ends."

"Oh, I see. Yes, Miss Coffin, I will have a cup. No sugar, lots of milk. You were saying, Mr. Joyce?"

"We know that Earl Newhaven has the means of creating and manipulating these Conjunction things. If he does not help us, I will slit Miss Black's delightful throat, and then I shall rape her."

"Ah."

Rita Coffin handed out the teacups. As Sebastian Dorrell took his, he smiled and flung its contents into Joyce's face. Joyce screamed as Rita Coffin took a tight grip on his genitals and twisted them savagely. Karen Black ran into the arms of Steve Mitchell.

"Guard him!" said Sebastian Dorrell sharply, handing Rita his portable disintegrator. Then he turned and followed the others through the secret trapdoor in the larder into Cheviot Close H.Q. proper.

"It's not here," said Steve Mitchell, throwing books and pieces of equipment all over the place.

"But if it's not here, where is it?" Johnny Terrier stood in a corner, frowning, his arms folded across his chest.

"There are only two possibilities," Mitchell told them. "Either the police have it, or it is that device which is causing the Conjunction. I doubt that the pigs have it, because they would have taken the whole transmuter."

Karen Black looked lovingly at the transmuter, the infamous 'Machine at Cheviot Close H.Q.' on which she had transformed the gorgeous Celia Blomberg into the golden statue which occupied the pride of place in her room at Heydn Hall.

"What can we do now?"

"Well, Sebastian tells us that the big Conjunction is at Portmeirion. That's the one we have to stop, and I guess that's where we'll find the transformer."

"We'd better hurry then," said Dorrell, "or the place will have sunk under all that metal."

10: KATMANDU AND ITS LAMASERIES

Captain Terrier awoke over a period of a quarter of an hour. He awoke to find himself in a drift of deep snow, and looking about him, he saw through the swirling flakes hundreds of corpses. Most of them were British.

Terrier struggled to sit up. He found that he had been shot through the shoulder but the wound was now frozen. The snow clung to his eyebrows, moustache and beard, and was already thick in his hair.

The wind blowing the snow howled down the pass from the mountains, and Captain Terrier felt lonely and afraid. He imagined that he saw Countess Caroline Giles standing above him, smiling down like an angel of mercy. But every time he tried to touch her, she melted slowly away.

The snow peaks towered above him and he knew he was going to die in their shadows.

* * *

Captain Terrier slept for a solid fourteen hours, awakening to find himself in a barely furnished stone room illuminated by a single candle which flickered in the draught. He was on a bed which felt like straw, and was covered in animal furs. The scent of myrrh was in the air.

A window in the door opened and when his eyes had finally focused properly, Terrier found himself looking at a benevolently smiling old Asiatic face. The door was pushed open, and the old man entered.

"Greetings, Captain," said the ancient, and Terrier was surprised that he spoke English. "How are you feeling, now?"

"Exhausted," Terrier admitted.

"Even after that nice long sleep?"

Terrier smiled feebly, and nodded. "Even after that nice long sleep." Then he continued: "Tell me, sir, where am I? What has happened?"

The old man smiled. "You are safe here," he told Terrier. "This is the seat of the High Lama. Even the Khan dares not offend against the sanctity of this citadel. You can stay here until you are recovered."

"Thank you. I thought the High Lama resided in Tibet, though? Surely I have not come so far east?"

The old man smiled. "Tibet?" he said. "Where did you get that notion from?"

Terrier stared at him. "From — it's common knowledge, man."

"Interesting," said the other. "You remember something so positively, despite the fact that it has never been true. Most interesting."

"But it is true!" Terrier protested. "What's the matter with you? What's going on here?"

The old man's only reply was to ask: "Tell me, my friend, do you know your own name?"

Terrier stared incredulously at the old man. With restraint he said, "24353048 Captain John A. Terrier. Dragoon Guards."

"Interesting. You are sure that your number is 24353048?"

"Absolutely positive."

"Thank you."

"Tell me, what on earth is this all about?"

The old man smiled. "Now you must rest," he said.

* * *

"You seem to have two memories," said the old man, whom Terrier had discovered to be one Dr. Jedekiah Jesus. "Two memories — does this mean two personalities?"

"I am not a schizophrenic, Doctor," Terrier informed him, taking a sip of mint tea. "Obviously with the ambush and all that, I must have been delirious when I told you who I was the first time."

"But, you were so certain, Captain, so detailed in your description. You claimed to be escaping from the Emperor of Iceland, to be seeking out some friends in the mountains. You were Johnny Terrier, the escaped train robber. You remembered these things quite well, sir. I don't see how they could be figments of your imagination."

"They must be! Or else, they are fragments of my past — things which have registered subconsciously upon me. Things I have read in the newspapers, heard on the wireless."

"Very well," said Dr. Jesus, reluctantly. He stood up. "Come with me."

Terrier swallowed the rest of his tea and rose to follow the old man.

* * *

Captain Terrier felt cold. He stood naked behind a contraption of wire and metal. A glass wheel was affixed to this frame and it was at this wheel that Dr. Jesus was looking.

"Very well," said Jesus to another monk who stood near to

Terrier. "Start the machine."

The monk turned a handle, and the glass wheel began to revolve. Jesus nodded in satisfaction as peculiar arrangements of light took form in the glass, around Terrier's body.

"All right, that's enough," he said after a minute. "You may leave us now, Mingyar."

When they were alone, Dr. Jesus said to Terrier, as the latter dressed himself, "I have, with the aid of that machine, studied your aura, Captain."

"Aura?"

"Yes," Jesus explained. "The aura is a form of radiation given out by the human body. By studying it, we are able to unravel the web of psychic and physiological forces acting upon a person's mind and body."

"Oh?" said Terrier, unbelieving. "And what did my aura tell you?"

"That you are subject to an alien influence!"

"What?!" Terrier burst out laughing. "What d'you mean, sir? Martians such as invented by Mr. H.G. Wells, or Mr. Jules Verne?"

Jedekiah Jesus smiled. "No, Captain Terrier. I mean the alien influence of Johnny Terrier the train robber."

"!"

"You see, the universe in which we live rotates around millions of other universes, the whole system being called the multiverse. In one of these alternative universes to ours, there lived a character by the name of Johnny Terrier, train robber by trade. Now, it is my theory that when you died, out there in the mountains, the psyche of this other Mr. Terrier entered your mind, but before that mind lost its own identity. Thus, you are two people in one. With two ambitions, two driving forces, two egos. At the moment, the train robber is suppressed, but you must beware emotional stress, Mr. Terrier, for the conflict of these two personalities would result in the destruction of your sanity."

Terrier looked closely at Jedekiah Jesus, trying to decide whether or not the man was mad. Revolving universes? Even Mr. Verne had not come up with anything that absurd, idiotic little Frenchman though he was.

"I cannot claim to understand what you have said, Doctor," he told Jesus diplomatically. "But since I have been here, I have gained the impression that you consider ordinary, things which I — indeed, most people in the West, think to be rather bizarre. Can you help me resolve one great personal tragedy?"

"Ask," said Jesus, "and it shall be given."

"Well," began Terrier, "it concerns a lovely young woman who is, unfortunately, dead. I've heard all your talk of reincarnation and so on, and I wonder if you could do anything in that line."

Terrier was obviously extremely embarrassed by the nature of this request. It bordered, he thought, on necrophilia and would involve all sorts of unpleasant activities.

Jedekiah Jesus, though, frowned as though considering a normal everyday problem. Eventually he said:

"How long has this woman been dead?"

"About three weeks, I would imagine," Terrier told him.

"Ah, then there should be no problem. You have to carry out a rather gruesome task, however."

"And what is that?"

"Why, you have to dig up the corpse, naturally."

Terrier winced. He half-decided at that moment not to go on, but Jedekiah Jesus was scribbling away on a piece of paper.

"You have to go to England with the corpse," he said, "and

you have to go to this address.”

Terrier took the piece of paper which Jesus was giving to him. He read it.

HEYDN HALL,
NEWHAVEN, SUSSEX.

11: HARLECH AND ITS SHELL-SMASHED CASTLE

“Somewhere around here is that bleedin’ transformer,” said Steve Mitchell angrily. Portmeirion now resembled nothing ever seen on Earth, a jungle of twisted metal and slabs of monstrous concrete stretching thousands of yards up into the clouds and at least a mile wide. The sky all around was a viridescent green, shimmering in the burning heat from the sun.

“There’s no problem guessing who’s coming through here,” Mitchell continued.

“No,” Sebastian Dorrell agreed, “only the Lords of Chaos would need such a revoltingly designed entry point.”

“Karen, I wish you’d stayed behind. Things will get nasty, soon.” As if to confirm these words, the ground beneath the car rumbled and the road tilted violently to the left.

“Christ!” exclaimed Johnny Terrier.

“You see, as the two (or maybe even more if it’s a really big one) universes bump together, each affects the laws of nature in the other. Stand by for a gravity reversal!”

Terrier looked with some panic in his eyes at Steve Mitchell, who was busy lighting a *Silva Thins*.

“Is that likely to happen?” Terrier demanded.

“Not likely,” Mitchell admitted, “but it has been known. I’ve never seen it. I’ve seen some nasty things happen at these Conjunctions though.”

“Shall we move towards it, then?” suggested Karen Black, not wanting the discussion to become morbid.

“Yes,” Mitchell agreed, letting the clutch out. They passed along a shaded, leafy lane, and to their right they saw the ruined castle of Harlech, where a television company had made its home. As they watched, two knights in shining golden armour appeared from behind the castle and began fighting with sword and mace. These knights were at least a hundred feet tall, and both Johnny Terrier and Karen Black stared in stupefaction as they smashed each other’s brains out, the globules of blood hanging in the sky and sparkling in the sunlight.

Then it began to rain. The rain consisted of tiny pieces of metal, reminding one of ball bearings. The rain poured down, many of the drops penetrating the roof of the car. Karen screamed but held up rather well until they had escaped the shadow of the cloud. At least nothing was happening yet that was directly and consciously intended to harm them. When that happened, things would get really bad. Steve Mitchell was wishing that he was on his own, with no responsibility for any others.

They sped on through fields of black and red needles, trying to ignore the purple mountains shifting about in the distance.

* * *

Meyrick Enzius was concerned. He had noticed quite some time ago that Tremadoc Bay was boiling and that only his little patch of sea seemed unaffected. Steam rolled over his boat and he was perspiring madly, even more than usual. The

eruption of bubbles was deafening.

When a school of dead fish rose to the surface and the overpowering stench of rapid decay reached his nostrils, Enzius at last decided to give this job the elbow. As he began to row in the direction in which he had last seen the shore, he figured that the creep who’d made the arrangements, the so-called Baron Mordok of Surf End, probably had no intention of paying him anyway. Besides, he’d never know that Enzius had pissed off in the middle of the job; the massive clouds of steam completely concealed him from the shore.

He burped and thought: what a lousy world.

* * *

“Well, we’ve got to walk now,” said Mitchell angrily. The road had dissolved into a river of boiling mud, the trees had become bent and wizened, and the gradient was one in two downwards.

At least, thought Mitchell, as they staggered across the fields (which continually attempted to make them fall over: things were becoming conscious), at least they could see Tremadoc Bay. He was interested in the one little dot in the bay which was not obscured by raging steam. He wondered if this could be the epicentre, the one calm place in the middle of the chaos caused by the Conjunction. If so, it was where he’d find the transformer.

Suddenly, Mitchell tripped over a tree trunk which had torn itself up from the ground in order to attack him. He heard the others crying after him as he accelerated down the hill, rolling over and over, until he lost consciousness as a result of the constant shocks to his frame.

* * *

There was a scraping, grating sound as Meyrick Enzius’ rowing boat beached upon a shore littered with boiled crabs and lobsters. However, Enzius did not feel particularly hungry, in fact, rather the opposite. He looked around for a bush, found one and dived behind it, pulling his trousers down simultaneously.

As he crouched and waited for something to happen, his eyes opened wide in amazement, for somebody came crashing down through the brush and foliage immediately above his head, to fall to the ground the other side of his screen bush. This increased the speed of his various biological functions, but he had not yet pulled up his moth-eaten pants when Steve Mitchell regained consciousness and stood up, rubbing his head.

Mitchell looked around for a moment, dazed. The mist was not so thick on the beach, and after seeing the boat, he saw Enzius, cowering in his bush and trying to cover his privates.

“Hello, Meyrick,” said Mitchell. “Now that I see you’re here, I understand a lot more. Come on, out of there.”

Meyrick Enzius made himself decent (if such a term could be used to describe one like he) and stepped on to the beach. He looked round as Karen Black, Terrier and Dorrell arrived on the scene, the latter minus his swagger-stick, frock-coat and one shoe.

“Where is it, Meyrick?” Mitchell asked quietly.

“It’s in the boat, of course.” Enzius didn’t want any trouble, especially not with Steve Mitchell, his former associate, because he knew that he was a useless fighter himself.

Mitchell walked over to the rowing boat. In the bows he saw an object wrapped in rags. He picked it up and tossed the rags into the sea, revealing a glistening silver cylinder with a semi-spherical ruby the size of his hand glowing, fluctuating, controlling the Conjunction.

“I’ll take that, Mr. Mitchell,” said an unwelcome voice. Joyce



had a Sten gun trained on Karen Black. He grinned, and Mitchell saw the small dirigible at the top of the hill. In the excitement of finding the transformer, nobody had seen it land.

"Don't be a fool, Joyce. This thing has to be destroyed. In your hands, it could bring about the destruction of the universe. It . . ."

They all looked up as a terrific roaring filled the air, and a gigantic figure appeared out to sea, the figure of a naked man, its head and shoulders way up above the mist.

Recovering from his shock before any of the others, Joyce lunged for the transformer in Steve Mitchell's hands. The God roared once more, paling the shriek of Willard Joyce as a bush in fact, the bush which Meyrick Enzius had despoiled and thus angered, reach out and shoved a sharp, thorny branch through his trousers and into his rectum, and a vine coiled around his throat and up his left nostril, penetrating the brain and worming its way through to the right eardrum.

Rapidly, Steve Mitchell switched the machine off – a complicated manoeuvre involving twenty-two buttons and switches. Then he carried out another operation, and the emerald at the opposite end of the cylinder began to glow.

As he stepped over the hideously writhing body of Willard Joyce, Mitchell heard the giant God screaming and looked back across the sea. The Chaos Lord was excreting diarrhetically, obviously the emergency sealing of the Conjunction had deprived him of his kaolin supply. The party on the beach watched in horrified fascination as this great God ejected first the contents of his rectum, then the rectum itself, followed by bowels, stomach, chest, heart and brain, until he no longer existed, only a filthy slick of blood and organs drifting on the cooling sea.

Karen Black was retching agonisingly.

"Come on," said Steve Mitchell, "let's get out of here. There's going to be a horrible stench pretty soon."

* * *

"Well, Johnny, we saved the world you know."

They were back in the basement of Heydn Hall, pleading amnesty from the civil war.

"What about the smaller Conjunctions," Terrier asked, "such as Batchworth Heath?"

"I doubt that anything important came through. Anyway, the Lords are no sweat if tackled in isolation. It was the big one that bothered me."

He finished screwing a tube into the mechanism of the Time Machine, and replaced the panel.

"Come aboard, Johnny. Let's give it a whirl."

Terrier stepped aboard and Mitchell flicked a switch.

And then there was nothing.

* * * * *

THE ENGLISHMAN'S LADY – INTERLUDE

Countess Caroline Giles stood by the frozen tree and tried to visualise the vacant landscape once more as her happy home. The vast, dead snow plains stretched for miles where children had run.

"We've come a long way, Caroline."

She nodded, but did not turn to look at Steve Mitchell. She looked, instead, at the massive viaduct of the fifty-lane motorway which seemed to have grown as the land cooled.

"You look lovely," said Mitchell, lighting up a turquoise *Sobranie* cocktail cigarette. In fact, she was wearing a black yashmak and red tam-o-shanter. Her hair was blown across her pale face by the biting wind.

"You're not looking so bad yourself," she said, turning to regard him in his light-checked deerstalker and matching burberry, with green breeks and dark brown velvet brogues.

"Come on," Mitchell said, gently. "You're depressing yourself out here. Let's go inside."

"Oh, Steve," she cried, suddenly breaking down and rushing into his arms, "it was so green and lovely. And now . . ."

Mitchell nodded sympathetically, his hand stroking the back of her head, and he swallowed hard to hold back the tears.

"Whoops!" came a familiar voice which made the Countess sob even harder, since it introduced an extra measure of helplessness into an already desperate situation. Mitchell, however, looked round, and felt that he should laugh and mock Sebastian Dorrell, who sat studpily on the ice.

"Sorry about this," said Dorrell indifferently, brushing the snow and ice particles from his tastelessly-designed vermilion and emerald-green tail-coat. "Would you believe, she wants to marry me?" he said, holding on to Steve Mitchell and pulling himself up. "My!" he said, looking at the quiescent, unliving, environs. "I seem to have come too far. What are you doing here, my fruit? And," he added from the corner of his mouth, "who is your friend?"

Caroline had gone back to her brooding, hands deep in pockets.

"We're stranded," Mitchell informed the other.

"Nasty," said Dorrell, frowning. "Very nasty, this. Afraid I can't help you, though."

"Can't you get us a Time Machine?" Mitchell pressed.

"Well," said Dorrell, doubt in his voice. "It's possible, I suppose. But don't bank on it. I don't think I want to return to this place and time." He cast another distasteful glance around them.

"Why not?"

"Because, my sweet Steve, I do not wish to become stranded at the End of Time myself. Not no way, see?"

Shrugging, he made to leave.

—End of the Second Story—

This story is very loosely based on Ravan Christchild's forthcoming novel, THE ENGLISHMAN'S LADY. Certain themes and plots in this story will be investigated in the next story, THE AGONIES OF TIME. Two characters in this story, Sebastian Dorrell and Electra Vanderpump, were created by Jocelyn Almond. Their original adventures and exploits are related in the novels THE DEATHS AND TIMES OF SEBASTIAN DORRELL, THE SICILIAN DRAGON, and THE RETICENCE OF PEACOCKS.

The End of All Songs

CONTINUED

A large green tear rolled down the scientist's cheek. 'For millennia I have tried to keep the torch of true research alight, single-handed. While the rest of you have devoted your energies to phantasies and whimsicalities, I have toiled. While you have merely exploited the benefits built up for you by our ancestors, I have striven to carry their work further, to understand that greatest mystery of all . . .'

'But it was already fairly understood, Brannart, most dedicated of investigators, by members of this Guild I mentioned . . .'

' . . . but you would thwart me even in that endeavour, with these fanciful tales, these sensational anecdotes, these evidently concocted stories of zones free from the influence of my beloved Effect, of groups of individuals who prove that Time has not a single Nature but several . . . Ah, Jherek! Is such cruelty deserved by one who has sought to be only a servant of learning, who has never interfered—criticised a little, perhaps, but never interfered—in the pursuits of his fellows?'

'I sought merely to enlighten . . .'

My Lady Charlottina went by in a great basket of lavender, only her head visible in the midst of the mound. She called out as she passed, 'Jherek! Amelia! Luck for sale! Luck for sale!' She had made the most, it was plain, of her short spell of temporal tourism. 'Do not bore them too badly, Brannart. I am thinking of withdrawing my patronage.'

Brannart sneered. 'I play such charades no longer!' But it seemed that he did not relish the threat. 'Death looms, yet still you dance, making mock of the few who would help you!'

Mrs Underwood understood. She murmured: 'Wheldrake knew, Professor Morphail, when he wrote in one of his last poems

*'Alone, then, from my basalt height
I saw the revellers rolling by
Their faces all bemasked,
Their clothing all bejewelled—
Spread cloaks like paradise's wings
in flight,
Gowns grown so hell-fire bright!
And purple lips drained purple
flasks,
And gem-hard eyes burned cruel.
Were these old friends I would
have clasped?'*

*Were these the dreamers of my
youth?*

*Ah, but old Time conquers more
than flesh!*

(He and his escort Death.)

Old Time lays waste the spirit, too!

And Time conquers Mind,

Time conquers Mind

Time Rules!'

But Brannart could not respond to her knowing, sympathetic smile. He looked bemused.

'It is very good,' said Jherek dutifully, recalling Captain Bastable's success. 'Ah, yes . . . I seem to recall it now.' He raised empty, insincere eyes towards the roof, as he had seen them do. 'You must quote me some of Wheldrake's verses, too, some day.'

The sidelong look she darted him was not unamused.

'Tcha!' said Brannart Morphail. The small floating gallery in which he stood swung wildly as he shifted his footing. He corrected it. 'I'll listen to nonsense no longer. Remember, Jherek Camelian, let your master Lord Jagged know that I'll not play his games! From henceforth I'll conduct my experiments in secret! Why should I not? Does he reveal his work to me?'

'I am not sure that he is with us at the End of Time. I meant to enquire . . .'

'Enough!'

Brannart Morphail wobbled away from them, stamping impatiently on the floor of his platform with his monstrous boot.

The Duke of Queens spied them. 'Look, most honoured of my guests! Wakaka Nakooka has come as a Martian Pastorellan from 1898.'

The tiny black man, himself a time traveller, turned with a grin and a bow. He was giving birth to fledgeling hawks through his nose. They fluttered towards the floor, now littered with at least two hundred of their brothers and sisters. He swirled his rich cloak and became a larger than average Kopps' Owl. With a flourish, off he flew.

'Always birds,' said the Duke, almost by way of apology. 'And frequently owls. Some people prefer to confine themselves by such means, I know. Is the party entertaining you both?'

'Your hospitality is as handsome as ever, most glamorous of Dukes,' Jherek floated beside his friend, adding softly: 'Though Brannart seems distraught.'

'His theories collapse. He has no other life. I hope you were kind to him, Jherek.'

'He gave us little opportunity,' said Amelia Underwood. Her next remark was a trifle dry. 'Even my quotation from Wheldrake did not seem to console him.'

'One would have thought that your discovery, Jherek, of the Nursery and the children would have stimulated him. In-

stead, he ignores Nurse's underground retreat, with all its machinery for the control of Time. He complains of trickery, suggests we invented it in order to deceive him. Have you seen your old school-chums, by the by?'

'A moment ago,' Jherek told him. 'Are they enjoying their new life?'

'I think so. I give them less discipline than did Nurse. And, of course, they begin to grow, now that they are free of the influence of the Nursery.'

'You have charge of them?'

The Duke seemed to swell with self-esteem. 'Indeed I have—I am their father. It is a pleasant sensation. They have excellent quarters in the menagerie.'

'You keep them in your menagerie, Duke?' Mrs Underwood was shocked. 'Human children?'

'They have toys there—playgrounds and so on. Where else would I keep them, Mrs Underwood?'

'But they grow. Are not the boys separated from the girls?'

'Should they be?' The Duke of Queens was curious. 'You think they will breed, eh?'

'Oh!' Mrs Underwood turned away.

'Jherek.' The Duke put a large arm around his friend's shoulders. 'While on the subject of menageries, may I take you to mine for a moment—at least until Mongrove arrives? There are several new acquisitions which I'm sure will delight you.'

Jherek was feeling overwhelmed by the party, for it had been a good while since he had spent so much time in the company of so many. He accepted the Duke's suggestion with relief.

'You will come too, Mrs Underwood?'

The Duke asked from politeness, it appeared, not enthusiasm.

'I suppose I should. It is my duty to inspect the conditions under which those poor children are forced to live.'

'The 19th century had certain religious attitudes towards children, I understand,' said the Duke conversationally to her as he led them through a door in the floor. 'Were they not worshipped and sacrificed at the same time?'

'You must be thinking of another culture,' she told him. She had recovered something of her composure, but there was still a trace of hostility in her manner towards her flamboyant host.

They entered a classic warren of passages and halls, lined with force-bubbles of varying sizes and shapes containing examples of thousands of different species, from a few viruses and intelligent microcosmic life to the gigantic two-thousand-foot-long Python Person whose space-ship had crashed on Earth some seven hundred years before. The cages were well kept and reproduced, as exactly as was possible, the environments of those

they contained. Mrs Underwood had herself, experience of such cages. She looked at these with a mixture of disgust and nostalgia.

'It seemed so simple then,' she murmured, 'when I thought myself merely damned to Hell.'

The Duke of Queens brushed at his fine Dundrearies. 'My homosapiens collection is somewhat sparse at present, Mrs Underwood—the children, a few time travellers, a space traveller who claims to be descended from common stock (though you would not credit it!). Perhaps you would care to see it after I have shown you my latest non-human acquisitions?'

'I thank you, Duke of Queens, but I have little interest in your zoo. I merely wished to reassure myself that your children are reasonably and properly looked after; I had forgotten, however, the attitudes which predominate in your world. Therefore, I think I shall—'

'Here we are!' Proudly the scarlet Duke indicated his new possessions. There were five of them, with globular bodies into which were set a row of circular eyes (like a coronet around the entire top section of the body) and a small triangular opening, doubtless a mouth. The bodies were supported by four bandy limbs which seemed to serve as legs as well as arms. The colour of these creatures varied from individual to individual, but all were nondescript, with light greys and dark browns proliferating.

'Is it Yusharisp and some friends?' Jherek was delighted to recognise the gloomy little alien who had first brought them the news of the world's doom. 'Why has not Mongrove . . . ?'

'These are from Yusharisp's planet,' explained the Duke of Queens, 'but they are not him. They are five fresh ones! I believe they came to look for him. In the meantime, of course, he has been home and returned here.'

'He is not aware of the presence of his friends on our planet?'

'Not yet.'

'You'll tell him tonight?'

'I think so. At an appropriate moment.'

'Can they communicate?'

'They refuse to accept translation pills, but they have their own mechanical translators. Which are, as you know, rather erratic.'

Jherek pressed his face against the force-bubble. He grinned at the inmates. He smiled. 'Hello! Welcome to the End of Time!'

China-blue eyes glared vacantly back at him.

'I am Jherek Carnelian. A friend of Yusharisp's,' he told them agreeably.

'The leader, the one in the middle, is known as Chief Public Servant Shashurup,' the Duke of Queens informed him.

Jherek made another effort. He waved his fingers. 'Good afternoon, Chief Public Servant Shashurup!'

'Why-ee (skree) do you continue-oo too-too-to tor(roar)ment us?' asked the CPS. 'All we a(kaa)sk(skree) is (hiss) that-tat-tat you do-oo-oo us (ushush) the cour(kur-kur-kur)tesy-ee of com-com-com-municat(tate-tate)ing our requests to your representat(tat-tat)ives!' He spoke wearily, without expectation of answer.

'We have no "representatives" save ourselves,' said Jherek. 'Is there anything wrong with your environment? I'm sure that the Duke of Queens would be only too pleased to make any adjustments you saw fit . . .'

'Skree-ee-ee,' said CPS Shashurup desperately. 'It is not(ot-ot) in our nat(tate-tate)ure to (skree) make(ake-ake) threat(et-et-et)s, but we must warn you (skree) that unless we are re(skree)lea(skree)sed our peo(pee-pee)ple will be forced to take steps to pro(pro-pro)tect us and secure(ure-ure) our release. You are behaving childishly! It is imposs(oss-oss)ible to believe(eve-eve-eve) that a race grown so old can still(ill-ill) skree-skree yowl eek yaaaarrrrk!'

Only Mrs Underwood showed any genuine interest in the Chief Public Servant's attempts to communicate with them. 'Shouldn't you release them, Duke of Queens?' she asked mildly. 'I thought it was argued that no life-form was kept here against its will.'

'Ah,' said the Duke, dusting at his braid, 'that is so, by and large. But if I let them go immediately, some rival will acquire them. I have not yet had time to display them as mine, you see.'

'Then how long must they remain prisoners?'

'Prisoners? I do not understand you, Mrs Underwood. But they'll stay here until after this party for Mongrove, at least. I'll conceive a special entertainment later, at which I may display them to full advantage.'

'Irr-re-re-sponsible oaf(f-f-f)!' cried CPS Shashurup, who had overheard some of this. 'Your people already suck(uck-uck) the universe dry and we do not complain (ain-ain-ain). Oh, but we shall see (skree-skree-skree) a change when we are free (ee-ee-ee-ee)!'

The Duke of Queens glanced at his index finger's nail, in which a small, perfect picture formed. It showed him the party above.

'Ah, Mongrove has arrived at last. Shall we return?'

In Which Lord Mongrove Reminds Us of Inevitable Doom

'Truly, my dear friends, I, too, disbelieved, as you do . . .,' moaned Mongrove from the centre of the hall '... but Yusharisp showed me withered planets, exhausted stars — matter collapsing, disintegrating, fading to nothing . . . Ah, it is bleak out there. It is bleak beyond imagining.' His great, heavy head dropped towards his broad, bulky chest and a monstrous sigh escaped him. Massive hands clasped themselves together just above his mighty stomach. 'All that are left are ghosts, and even the ghosts fade. Civilisations that, until recently, spanned a thousand star-systems have become merely a whisper of static from a detector screen. Gone without trace. Gone without trace. As we shall go, my friends.' Mongrove's gaze upon them was a mixture of sympathy and accusation. 'But let my guide Yusharisp, who risked his own life to come to us, to warn us of our fate, and to whom none but I would listen, tell you in his own words.'

'Scarce(skree)ly—scarcely any life survives in the universe,' said the globular alien. 'The process of collapse continues faster than (roar) I predicted. This is partially (skree) the fault of the people of this planet. Your cities (yelp) draw their energy from the easiest available (skree-skree) source. Now they (roar) suck raw energy from disintegrating novae, from already (skree) dying suns. It is the only reason why (skree) you still (yelp) survive!'

Bishop Castle stood at Jherek's left shoulder. He leaned to murmur: 'In truth I become quickly bored with boredom. The Duke of Queens' efforts to make entertainment from that alien are surely useless, as even he must see now.' But he lifted his head and dutifully cried: 'Hurrah! Hurrah!' and applauded.

Mongrove lifted a hand. 'Yusharisp's point is that we are contributing to the speed with which the universe perishes. If we were to use less energy for pursuits like—like this party—we could slow down the rate of collapse. It is all running out, dear friends!'

My Lady Charlottina said, in a loud whisper, 'I thought Mongrove shunned what he called "materialism". This talk smacks of it, if I'm not mistaken. But, then, I probably am.' She smiled to herself.

But Li Pao said firmly: 'He echoes only what I have been saying for years.'

An Iron Orchid, in red-and-white checks and a simple red-and-white domino, linked arms with Bishop Castle. 'The world does grow boring, I agree, most



concise of clerics. Everyone seems to be repeating themselves.' She giggled. 'Especially me!'

'It is even in our power, thanks to our cities, to preserve this planet,' continued Mongrove, raising his voice above what had become a general babble of conversation. 'Yusharisp's people sent us their finest minds to help. They should have arrived by now. When they do, however, there is just a chance that there will still be time to save our world.'

'He must be referring to those we have just seen in the Duke's menagerie,' said Mrs Underwood. She gripped Jherek's arm. 'We must tell Lord Mongrove where they are!'

Jherek patted her hand. 'We could not. It would be in very bad taste to spoil the Duke's surprise.'

'Bad taste?'

'Of course.'

She subsided, frowning.

Milo de Mars went by, leaving a trail of perfectly symmetrical gold six-pointed stars in her wake. 'Forgive me, Lord Mongrove,' she fluted, as the giant petulantly brushed the metallic things aside.

'Oh, what self-satisfied fools you are!' cried Mongrove.

'Should we not be? It seems an excellent thing to be,' said Mistress Christia in surprise. 'Is it not what, we are told, the human race has striven for, all these millions of years? Is it not contentment?' She twirled her Grecian gown. 'Is that not what we have?'

'You have not earned it,' said Li Pao. 'I think that is why you will not make efforts to protect it.'

Amelia smiled approval, but Jherek was puzzled. 'What does he mean?'

'He speaks of the practical basis of the morality you were so anxious to understand, Mr Carnelian.'

Jherek brightened, now that he realised they touched upon a subject of interest. 'Indeed? And what is this practical basis?'

'In essence – that nothing is worth possessing unless it has been worked for.'

He said, with a certain slyness, 'I have worked hard to possess you, dearest Amelia.'

Again amusement threatened to get the better of her. The struggle showed on her face for only a moment before she was once more composed. 'Why, Mr Carnelian, will you always insist on confusing the issue with the introduction of personal matters?'

'Are such matters less important?'

'They have their place. Our conversation, I thought, was a trifle more abstract. We discussed morality and its usefulness in life. It was a subject dear to my father's heart and the substance of many a sermon.'

'Yet your civilisation, if you'll forgive

me saying so; did not survive for any great length of time. A couple of hundred years saw its complete destruction.'

She was non-plussed, but soon found an answer: 'It is not to do with the survival of civilisations as such, but with personal satisfaction. If one leads a moral life, a useful life, one is happier.'

He scratched the head beneath the tweed cap. 'It seems to me that almost everyone at the End of Time is happier, however, than were those I encountered in your Dawn Age era. And morality is a mystery to us, as you know.'

'It is a mindless happiness—how shall it survive the disaster Lord Mongrove warns us about?'

'Disaster, surely, is only that if one believes it to be important. How many here, would you say, believe in Mongrove's doom?'

'But they will.'

'Are you certain?'

She cast an eye about her. She could not say that she was certain.

'But are you not afraid, even a little?' she asked him.

'Afraid? Well, I would regret the passing of all this variety, this wit. But it has existed. Doubtless something like it will exist again.'

She laughed and she took his arm. 'If I did not know you better, Mr Carnelian, I should mistake you for the wisest and most profound of philosophers.'

'You flatter me, Amelia.'

Mongrove's voice continued to boom from the babble, but the words were indistinct. 'If you will not save yourselves, think of the knowledge you could save the inherited knowledge of a million generations!'

An Iron Orchid, in green velvet and brocade, glided by beside Brannart Morphail, who was discoursing along lines very similar to Mongrove's, though it was evident he did not listen to the gloomy giant. With some alarm, Jherek heard her say: 'Of course, you are completely right, Brannart. As a matter of fact, I have it in mind to take a trip through time myself. I know you would disapprove, but it is possible that I could be of use to you . . .'

Jherek heard no more of his mother's remarks. He shrugged, dismissing them as the expression of a passing foible.

Sweet Orb Mace was making love to Mistress Christia, the Everlasting Concubine, in a most interesting fashion. Their intertwined bodies drifted amongst the other guests. Elsewhere, Orlando Chombi, Kimick Rentbrain and O'Kala Incarnadine linked hands in a complicated aerial dance, while the recently re-styled Countess of Monte Carlo extended her substance until she was thirty feet tall and all but invisible; this, it seemed, for the entertainment of the Nursery children,

who gathered around her and laughed with delight.

'We have a duty to our ancestors!' groaned Mongrove, now, for the moment, out of sight. Jherek thought he was buried somewhere in the sudden avalanche of blue and green roses tipped from Doctor Volospion's Pegasus-drawn platform. 'And to those (skree) who follow us . . .' added a piping but somewhat muffled voice.

Jherek sighed. 'If only Jagged would reveal himself, Amelia! Then, I am sure, any confusion would be at an end.'

'He might be dead,' she said. 'You feared as much.'

'It would be a difficult loss to bear. He was my very best friend. I have never known anyone, before, who could not be resurrected.'

'Mongrove's point that no one shall be resurrected after the apocalypse.'

'I agree the prospect is more attractive, for then none should feel a loss.' They drifted towards the floor, still littered with the feebly fluttering fledgeling hawks. Many had already expired, for Wakaka Nakooka had forgotten to feed them. Absently, Jherek dissipated them, so that he and Amelia might descend and stand there, looking up at a party grown less sedate than when first they had arrived.

'I thought you were of the opinion that we should live forever, Amelia,' he said, still peering upward.

'It is my *belief*, not my opinion.'

He failed to distinguish the difference.

'In the Life Beyond,' she said. She tried to speak with conviction, but her voice faltered, adding to herself: 'Well, yes, perhaps there is still a Life Beyond, hard though it is to imagine. Ah, it is so difficult to retain one's ordinary faith . . .'

'It is the end of everything!' continued Mongrove, from somewhere within the mountain of roses. 'You are lost! Lost! You will not listen! You will not understand! Beware! Oh, beware!'

'Mr Carnelian, we should try to make them listen to Lord Mongrove, surely!'

Jherek shook his head. 'He has nothing very interesting to say, Amelia. Has he not said it before? Is not Yusharisp's information identical to that which he first brought, during the Duke's African party. It means little . . .'

'It means much to me.'

'How so?'

'It strikes a chord. Lord Mongrove is like the prophet to whom none would listen. In the end his words were vindicated. The Bible is full of such stories.'

'Then, surely, we have no need for more?'

'You are deliberately obtuse!'

'I assure you that I am not.'

'Then help Mongrove.'

'His temperament and mine are too

The Honour of an Underwood

dissimilar. Brannart will comfort him, and Werther de Goethe, too. And Li Pao. He has many friends, many who will listen. They will gather together and agree that all but themselves are fools, that only they have the truth, the right to control events and so on. It will cheer them up and they'll doubtless do little to spoil the pleasure of anyone else. For all we know, their antics will prove entertaining.'

'Is "entertainment" your only criterion?'

'Amelia, if it pleases you, I'll go this moment to Mongrove and groan in tune with him. But my heart will not be in it, love of my life, joy of my existence.'

She sighed. 'I would not have you live a lie, Mr Carnelian. To encourage you towards hypocrisy would be a sin, I know.'

'You have become somewhat sober again, dearest Amelia.'

'I apologise. Evidently, there is nothing to be done, in reality. You think Mongrove postures?'

'As do we all, according to his temperament. It is not that he is insincere, it is merely that he chooses one particular role, though he knows many other opinions are as interesting and as valuable as his own.'

'A few short years are left ...' came Mongrove's boom, more distant now.

'He does not wholly believe in what he says?'

'Yes and no. He chooses wholly to believe. It is a conscious decision. Tomorrow, he could make an entirely different decision, if he became bored with this role (and I suspect he *will* become bored as he realises how much he bores others).'

'But Yusharisp is sincere.'

'So he is, poor thing.'

'Then there is no hope for the world.'

'Yusharisp believes that.'

'You do not?'

'I believe everything and nothing.'

'I never quite understood before ... Is that the philosophy of the End of Time?'

'I suppose it is.' He looked about him.

'I do not think we shall see Lord Jagged here, after all. Lord Jagged could explain these things to you, for he enjoys discussing abstract matters. I have never much had the penchant. I have always preferred to make things rather than to talk. I am a man of action, you see. Doubtless it is something to do with being the product of natural childbirth.'

Her eyes, when next she looked at him, were full of warmth.

'I am still uncertain. Perhaps if we began again?'

Amiably, Jherek disintegrated the west wing.

They were rebuilding his ranch. The Bromley-Gothic red-brick villa had vanished. In its place stood something altogether larger, considerably lighter, having more in common with the true Gothic of mediaeval France and Belgium, with fluted towers and delicately fashioned windows.

'It is all, I think, a trifle too magnificent,' she said. She fingered her fine chin. 'And yet, it would only seem grandiose in Bromley, as it were. Here, it is almost simple.'

'If you will try your own amethyst power ring ...' he murmured.

'I have still to trust these things ...' But she twisted and thought at the same time.

A fairy-tale tower, the ideal of her girlhood, stood there. She could not bring herself to disseminate it.

He was delighted, admiring its slender 120 feet, topped by twin turrets with red conical roofs. It glittered. It was white. There were tiny windows.

'Such an elegant example of typical Dawn Age architecture!' he complimented her.

'You do not find it too fanciful?' She was shy of her achievement, but pleased.

'A model of utility!'

'Scarcely that ...' She blushed. Her own imagination, made concrete, astonished her.

'More! You must make more!'

The ring was turned again and another tower sprang up, connected to its fellow by a little marble bridge. With some hesitation she disseminated the original building he had made at her request, replacing it with a main hall and living-apartments above. She gave her attention to the landscape around. A moat appeared, fed by a sparkling river. Formal gardens, geometric, filled with her favourite flowers, stretched into the distance, giving place to rose bowers and undulating lawns, a lake, with cypresses and poplars and willows. The sky was changed to a pale blue and the small clouds in it were never whiter, then she added subtle colours, pinks and yellows, as of the beginnings of a sunset. All was as she had once dreamed of, not as a respectable Bromley housewife, but as a little girl who had read fairy stories with a sense that she consulted forbidden texts. Her face shone as she contemplated her handiwork. A new innocence bloomed there. Jherek watched, and revelled in her pleasure.

'Oh, I should not ...'

A unicorn now grazed upon the lawn. It looked up, its eyes mild and intelligent. Its golden horn caught the sunlight.

'It is everything I was told could never be. My mother admonished me, I remember, for entertaining silly fancies. She said no good would come of them.'

'And so you still think, do you not?'

She glanced his way. 'So I *should* think, I suppose.'

He said nothing.

'My mother argued that little girls who believed in fairy tales grew up to be shallow, vain and, ultimately, disappointed, Mr Carnelian. The world, I was told, was harsh and terrible and we were put into it in order that we should be tested for our worthiness to dwell in Heaven.'

'It is a reasonable belief. Though unrewarding, I should have thought, in the long run. Limiting, at least.'

'Limitations were regarded as being good for one. I have expressed that opinion myself.'

'So you have.'

'Yet there are no more cruelties here than there were in my world.'

'Cruelties?'

'Your menageries.'

'Of course.'

'But you do not, I now understand, realise that you are cruel. You are not hypocrites in that particular way.'

He was euphoric. He was enjoying listening to her voice as he might enjoy the peaceful buzz of an insect. He spoke only to encourage her to continue.

'We keep more prisoners in my society, when you think of it,' she said. 'How many wives are prisoners of their homes, their husbands?' She paused. 'I should not dare think such radical ideas at home, much less utter them!'

'Why not?'

'Because I would offend others. Disturb my friends. There are social checks to one's behaviour, far greater than any legal or moral ones. Have you learned that yet, from my world, Mr Carnelian?'

'I have learned something, but not a great deal. You must continue to teach me.'

'I saw the prisons when you were incarcerated. How many prisoners are there through no fault of their own? Victims of poverty. And poverty enslaves so many more millions than you could ever contain in your menageries. Oh, I know. I know. You could have argued that, and I should not have been able to deny it.'

'Ah?'

'You are kind to humour me, Mr Carnelian.' Her voice grew vague as she looked again upon her first creation. 'Oh, it is so beautiful!'

He came to stand beside her, and when he put an arm about her shoulder, she did

not resist.

Some time went by. She furnished their palace with simple, comfortable furniture, refusing to clutter the rooms. She made tapestries and brocades for floors and walls. She re-introduced a strict pattern of day and night. She created two large, long-haired black-and-white cats, and the parklands around the palace became populated with deer as well as unicorns. She longed for books, but he could find her none, so in the end she began to write one for herself and found this almost as satisfactory as reading. Yet, still he must court her. Still she refused the fullest expression of her affections. When he proposed marriage, as he continued to do, frequently, she would reply that she had given an oath in a ceremony to remain loyal to Mr Underwood until death should part them.

He returned, time after time, to the reasonable logic that indeed Mr Underwood *was* dead, had been dead for many millennia, that she was free. He began to suspect that she did not care a fig for her vows to Mr Underwood, that she played a game with him, or, failing that, waited for him to take some action. But as to what the action should be, she gave him no clue.

This idyll, pleasurable though it was, was marred not only by his frustration, but also by his concerns for his friend Lord Jagged of Canaria. He had begun to realise to what extent he had relied on Jagged to guide him in his actions, to explain the world to him, to help him shape his own destiny. His friend's humour, his advice, indeed, his very wisdom were much missed. Every morning, upon awaking, he hoped to see Lord Jagged's air car upon the horizon, and every morning he was disappointed.

One morning, however, as he lounged alone upon a balcony while Mrs Underwood worked at her book, he saw a visitor arrive, in some kind of Egyptianate vessel of ebony and gold, and it was Bishop Castle, his high crown nodding on his handsome head, a tall staff in his left hand, his three golden orbs bobbing at his belt, stepping gracefully from air car to balcony and kissing him lightly upon the forehead, complimenting him on the white linen suit made for him by Mrs Underwood.

'Things have settled, since the Duke's party,' the bishop informed him. 'We return to our old lives with some relief. A great disappointment, Mongrove, didn't you think?'

'The Duke of Queens sets great store by his entertainment value. I cannot think why.'

'He is out of touch with everyone else's taste. Scarcely a recommendation in one who desires to be the most popular of hosts.'

'It is not,' Jherek added, 'as if he were himself interested in this alien's prophecies. He probably hoped that Mongrove would have had some adventures on his trip through the universe something with a reasonable amount of sensation in it. Yet Mongrove may be relied upon to ruin even the best anecdote'

'It is why we love him.'

'To be sure.'

Mrs Underwood, in rose-pink and yellow, entered the room behind the balcony. She extended a hand. 'Dear Bishop Castle. How pleasant to see you. You will stay for lunch?'

'If I do not inconvenience you, Mrs Underwood.' It was plain that he had done much research.

'Of course not.'

'And what of my mother, the Iron Orchid?' asked Jherek. 'Have you seen her of late?'

Bishop Castle scratched his nose with his crook. 'You had not heard, then? She seeks to rival you, Jherek, I am sure. She somehow inveigled Brannart Morphail into allowing her the use of one of his precious time craft. She has gone!'

'Through time?'

'No less. She told Brannart that she would return with proof of his theories, evidence that you manufactured the tales you told him! I am surprised no-one has yet informed you.' Bishop Castle laughed. 'She is so original, your beautiful mother!'

'But she may be killed,' said Mrs Underwood. 'Is she aware of the risks?'

'Fully, I gather.'

'Oh!' cried Jherek. 'Mother!' He put his hand to his lips; he bit the lower one. 'It is you, Amelia, she seeks to rival. She thinks she is outdone by you!'

'She spoke of a time for her return?'

Mrs Underwood asked Bishop Castle. 'Not really. Brannart might know. He controls the experiment.'

'Controls! Ha!' Jherek put his head in his hands.

'We may only pray—excuse me—hope that she returns safely,' said Mrs Underwood.

'Time cannot defeat the Iron Orchid!' Bishop Castle laughed. 'You are too gloomy. She will be back soon—doubtless with news of exploits to rival yours which is what she hopes for, I am sure.'

'It was luck, only, that saved us both from death,' Mrs Underwood told him.

'Then the same luck will come to her aid.'

'You are probably right,' said Jherek. He was despondent. First his best friend gone, and now his mother. He looked at Mrs Underwood as if she would once again vanish before his eyes, as she had done before, when he had first tried to kiss her, so long ago.

Mrs Underwood spoke rather more cheerfully, in Jherek's view, than the

situation demanded. 'Your mother is not one to perish, Mr Carnelian. For all you know, it was merely a facsimile that was sent through time. The original could still be here.'

'I am not sure that is possible,' he said. 'There is something to do with the life essence. I have never properly understood the theory concerning transmigration. But I do not think you can send a doppelganger through time, not without accompanying it.'

'She'll be back,' said Bishop Castle with a smile.

But Jherek, worrying for Lord Jagged, becoming convinced that he had perished, lapsed into silence and was a poor host during lunch.

Several more days passed, without incident, with the occasional visit from My Lady Charlolina or the Duke of Queens or Bishop Castle, again. The conversation turned often to speculation as to the fate of the Iron Orchid, as was inevitable, but if Brannart Morphail had news of her, he had passed none of it on, even to My Lady Charlolina, who still chose to play patron to him and give him his laboratories in her own vast domicile at Below-the-Lake. Neither would Brannart tell anyone the Iron Orchid's original destination.

In the meanwhile, Jherek continued to pay court to Amelia Underwood. He learned the poems of Wheldrake (or, at least, those she could remember) from her and found that they could be interpreted in reference to their own situation—'*So close these lovers were, yet was their union sundered by the world*'—'*Cruel Fortune did dictate that they/Should ever singly pass that way*,' and so on—until she professed a lack of interest in him who had been her favourite poet. But it seemed to Jherek Carnelian that Amelia Underwood began to warm to him a little more. The occasional sisterly kisses became more frequent, the pressure of a hand, the quality of a smile all spoke of a thaw in her resolve. He took heart. Indeed, so settled had become their domestic routine that it was almost as if they were married. He hoped that she might slip, almost accidentally, into consummation, given time.

Life flowed smooth, and, save for the nagging fear at the back of his mind that his mother and Lord Jagged might never return, he experienced a tranquility he had not enjoyed since he and Mrs Underwood had first shared a house together; and he refused to remember that whenever he had come to accept such peace, it had always been interrupted by some new drama. But, as the uneventful days continued, his sense of inevitable expectation increased, until he began to wish that whatever it was that was going to happen would happen as soon as possible.

*Various Alarums, a Good Deal of
Confusion, a Hasty Excursion*

He even identified the source of the next blow—it would be delivered by the Iron Orchid, returning with sensational information, or else by Jagged, to tell them that they must go back to the Palaeozoic to complete some overlooked task.

The blow did come. It came one morning about three weeks after they had settled in their new home. It came as a loud and repetitive knocking on the main door. Jherek stumbled from his bed and went to stand on his balcony, leaning over to see who was disturbing them in this peculiar manner (no-one he knew ever used that door). On the bijou draw-bridge was grouped a party of men all of whom were familiar. The person knocking on the main door was Inspector Springer, wearing a new suit of clothes and a new bowler hat indistinguishable from his previous ones; gathered around him was a part of burly police officers, some ten or twelve; behind the police officers, looking self-important but a little wild-eyed, stood none other than Mr Harold Underwood, his pince-nez on his nose, his hay-coloured hair neatly parted in the middle, wearing a suit of good, dark worsted, an extremely stiff white collar and cuffs, a tightly knotted tie and black, polished boots. In his hand he held a hat similar to Inspector Springer's. Behind this party, a short distance away in the ornamental garden, there buzzed a huge contraption consisting of a number of interconnected wheels, ratchets, crystalline rods and what seemed to be padded benches—an open, box-like structure, but bearing a close similarity to the machine Jherek had first seen in the Palaeozoic. At the controls sat the bearded man in plus-fours and Norfolk jacket who had given them his hamper. He was the first to see Jherek. He waved a greeting.

From a nearby balcony there came a stifled shriek: 'Harold!'

Mr Underwood looked up and fixed a cold eye upon his wife, in negligee and slippers of a sort not normally associated with a Bromley housewife.

'Ha!' he said, his worst fears confirmed. Now he saw Jherek, peering down at him. 'Ha!'

'Why are you here?' croaked Jherek, before he realised he would not be understood.

Inspector Springer began to clear his throat, but Harold Underwood spoke first.

'Igrie gazer,' he seemed to say, 'ijika batterob honour!'

'We had better let them in, Mr Carnelian,' said Mrs Underwood in a faint voice.

'I 'ave, sir,' said Inspector Springer with heavy satisfaction, 'been invested with Special Powers. The 'Ome Secretary 'imself 'as ordered me to look into this case.'

'The new machine—my, um, Chronomnibus—was requisitioned,' said the Time Traveller apologetically from the back-ground. 'As a patriot, though strictly speaking not from this universe...'

'Under conditions of utmost secrecy,' continued the inspector, 'we embarked upon our Mission...'

Jherek and Mrs Underwood stood on their threshold and contemplated their visitors.

'Which is?' Mrs Underwood was frowning pensively at her husband.

'To place the ringleaders of this plot under arrest and return forthwith to our own century so that they—that's you, of course, among 'em—may be questioned as to their motives and intentions.' Inspector Springer was evidently quoting specifically from his orders.

'And Mr Underwood?' Jherek asked politely. 'Why is he here?'

'E's one o' the few 'oo can identify the people we're after. Anyway, 'e volunteered.'

She said, bemusedly: 'Have you come to take me back, Harold?'

'Ha!' said her husband.

Sergeant Sherwood, sweating and, it seemed, only barely in control of himself, fingering his tight, dark blue collar, emerged from the ranks of his constables (who, like him, seemed to be suffering from shock) and, saluting, stood beside his leader.

'Shall we place these two under arrest, sir?'

Inspector Springer licked his lips contemplatively. 'Ang on a mo, sergeant, before putting 'em in the van.' He reached into his jacket and produced a document, turning to Jherek. 'Are you the owner of these premises?'

'Not exactly,' said Jherek, wondering if the translation pills he and Amelia had taken were doing their job properly. 'That is to say, if you could explain the meaning of the term, perhaps I could...'

'Are you or are you not the owner...'

'Do you mean did I create this house?'

'If you built it, too, fair enough. All I want to know...'

'Mrs Underwood created it, didn't you, Amelia?'

'Ha!' said Mr Underwood, as if his worst suspicions were confirmed. He glared coldly at the fairy-tale palace.

'This lady built it?' Inspector Springer

became pettish. 'Now, listen 'ere...'

'I gather you are unfamiliar with the methods of building houses at the End of Time, inspector,' said Mrs Underwood, making some effort to save the situation. 'One has power rings. They enable one—'

Inspector Springer raised a stern hand. 'Let me put it another way. I 'ave 'ere a warrant to search your premises or, indeed, any premises I might regard as 'aving' upon them evidence in this matter, or 'arbourin' suspected criminals. So, if you will kindly allow me and my men to pass...'

'Certainly.' Jherek and Amelia stepped aside as Inspector Springer led his men into the hall. Harold Underwood hesitated a moment, but at last crossed the threshold, as if into the netherworld, while the Time Traveller hung back, his cap in his hands, murmuring disconnected phrases. 'Awfully embarrassing... had no idea... a bit of a joke, really... regret the inconvenience... Home Secretary assured me... can see no reason for intrusion... would never have agreed... But at Jherek's welcoming gesture, he joined the others. 'Delightful house... very similar to those structures one finds in the, um... 58th century, is it?... Glad to find you arrived back safely... am still a trifle at sea, myself...'

'I have never seen such a large time machine,' said Jherek, hoping to put him at ease.

'Have you not?' The Time Traveller beamed. 'It is unusual, isn't it? Of course, the commercial possibilities have not escaped me, though since the Government took an interest everything has been shrouded in secrecy, as you can imagine. This was my first opportunity to test it under proper conditions.'

'It would be best, sir, I think,' cautioned Inspector Springer, 'to say no more to these people. They are, after all, suspected alien agents.'

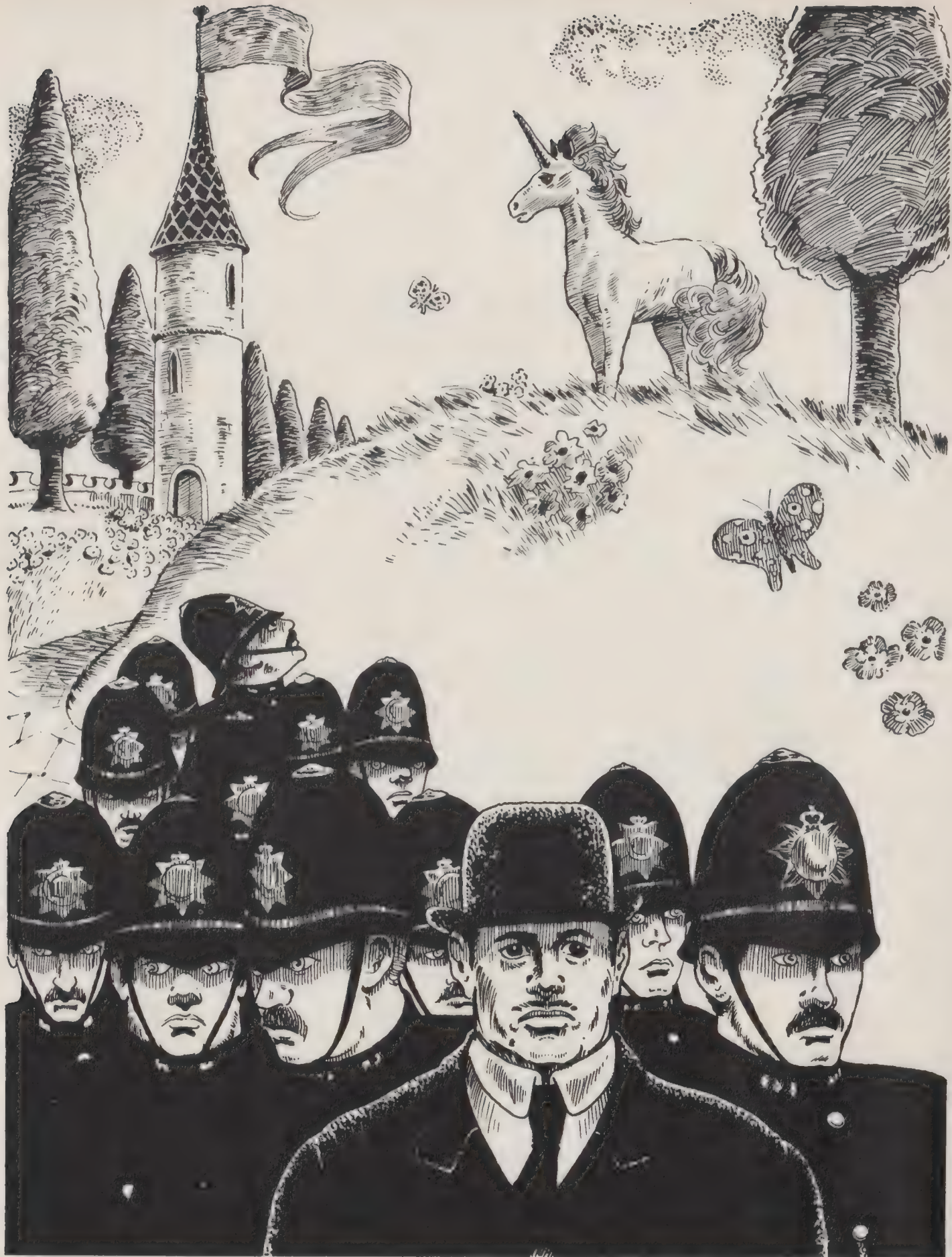
'Oh, but we have met before. I had no idea, when I agreed to help, that these were the people you meant. Believe me, inspector, they are almost undoubtedly innocent of any crime.'

'That's for me to decide, sir,' reproved the policeman. 'The evidence I was able to place before the 'Ome Secretary upon my return was sufficient to convince 'im of a plot against the Crown.'

'He seemed somewhat bewildered by the whole affair. His questions to me were not exactly explicit...'

'Oh, it's bewildering, right enough. Cases of this kind often are. But I'll get to the bottom of it, given time.' Inspector Springer fingered his watch-chain. 'That's why there is a police force, sir. To solve bewildering cases.'

'Are you certain that you are within your jurisdiction, inspector...?' began Mrs Underwood.



'I 'ave ascertained from the gentleman 'ere—' Inspector Springer indicated the Time Traveller—'that we are still on English soil. Therefore . . .'

'Is it really?' cried Jherek. 'How wonderful!'

'Thought you'd get away with it, eh?' murmured Sergeant Sherwood, eyeing him maliciously. 'Made a bit of a mistake, didn't you, my lad?'

'Ow many others staying 'ere?' Inspector Springer enquired as he and his men tramped into the main hall. He looked with disgust upon the baskets of flowers which hung everywhere, upon the tapestries and the carpets and the furniture, which was of the most decadent sort of design.

'Only ourselves.' Mrs Underwood glanced away from the grim eye of her husband.

'Ha!' said Mr Underwood.

'We have separate apartments,' she explained to the inspector, upon whose ruddy features there had spread the suggestion of a leer.

'Well, sir,' said Sergeant Sherwood, 'shall we take this pair back first?'

'To the 19th century?' Jherek asked.

'That is what he means,' the Time Traveller replied on the sergeant's behalf.

'This would be your opportunity, Amelia.' Jherek's voice was small. 'You said that you wished, still, to return . . .'

'It is true . . .' she began.

'Then . . .?'

'The circumstances . . .'

'You two'd better stay 'ere,' Inspector Springer was telling two of the constables, 'to keep an eye on 'em. We'll search the premises.' He led his men off towards a staircase. Jherek and Amelia sat down on a padded bench.

'Would you care for some tea?' Amelia asked her husband, the Time Traveller and the two constables.

'Well . . .' said one of the constables.

'I think that'd be all right, ma'am,' said the other.

Jherek was eager to oblige. He turned a power ring and produced a silver tea-pot, six china cups and saucers, a milk-jug and a hot-water jug, a silver tea-strainer, six silver spoons and a primus stove.

'Sugar, I think,' she murmured, 'but not the stove.'

He corrected his error.

The two police constables sat down together quite suddenly, goggling at the tea. Mr Underwood remained standing, but seemed rather more stiff than he had been. He muttered to himself. Only the Time Traveller reacted in a normal fashion.

Mrs Underwood seemed to be suppressing amusement as she handed out cups and poured the tea. The constables accepted the tea, but only one of them drank any. The other merely said, 'Gord!'

and put his cup on the table, while his companion grinned weakly and said: 'Very good, very good,' over and over again.

From above there came a sudden loud cracking sound and a yell. Puzzled, Jherek and Amelia looked up.

'I do hope they are not damaging . . .' began the Time Traveller.

There was a thunder of boots and Inspector Springer, Sergeant Sherwood and their men came tumbling, breathless, back into the hall.

'They're attacking!' cried Sergeant Sherwood to the other two policemen.

'Oo?'

'The enemy, of course!' Inspector Springer answered, running to peer cautiously out of the window. 'They must know we've occupied these premises. They're a cunning lot, I'll grant you that.'

'What happened up there, inspector?' asked Jherek, carrying forward a cup of tea for his guest.

'Something took the top off the tower, that's all!' Automatically the inspector accepted the tea. 'Clean off. Some kind of 'igh-powered naval gun, I'd say. 'Ave you got any sea near 'ere?'

'None, I fear. I wonder who could have done that.' Jherek looked enquiringly at Amelia. She shrugged.

'The Wrath of God!' announced Mr Underwood helpfully, but nobody took much notice of his suggestion.

'I remember, once, some flying machine of the Duke of Queens' crashed into my ranch,' Jherek said. 'Did you notice a flying machine, inspector?'

Inspector Springer continued to peer through the window. 'It was like a bolt from the blue,' he said.

'One minute the roof was there,' added Sergeant Sherwood, 'the next it was gone. There was this explosion then bang! gone. It got very 'ot for a second, too.'

'Sounds like some sort of ray,' said the Time Traveller, helping himself to another cup of tea.

Inspector Springer proved himself a reader of the popular weeklies by the swiftness with which he accepted the notion. 'You mean a Death Ray?'

'If you like.'

Inspector Springer fingered his moustache. 'We were fools not to come armed,' he reflected.

'Ah!' Jherek remembered his first encounter with the brigand-musicians in the forest. 'That's probably the Lat returned. They had weapons. They demonstrated one. Very powerful they were, too.'

'Those Latvians. I might 'ave guessed!' Inspector Springer crouched lower. 'Ave you any means of telling 'em you're our prisoners?'

'None at all, I fear. I could go and find

them, but they could be hundreds of miles away.'

'Undreds? Oh, Lor!' muttered Sergeant Sherwood. He looked at the ceiling as if he expected it to fall in on him. 'You're right, inspector. We should've put in for some pistols.'

'The Day of Doom is here!' intoned Harold Underwood, raising a finger.

'We must introduce him to Lord Mongrove,' Jherek said, inspired. 'They would get on very well, don't you think, Amelia?'

But she did not reply. She was staring with a mixture of sympathy and resignation at her poor, mad husband. 'I am to blame,' she said. 'It is all my doing. Oh, Harold, Harold.'

There came another loud report. Cracks began to appear in the walls and ceiling. Jherek turned a power ring and re-formed the palace. 'I think you'll find the roof's back on, inspector, should you wish to continue your tour.'

'I'll receive a medal for this, if I ever get back,' said Inspector Springer to himself. He sighed.

'I'd suggest, sir,' said his sergeant, 'that we make the most of what we've got and return with these two.'

'You're probably right. We'll do a dash for it. Better put the gyves on 'em, eh?'

Two constables produced their handcuffs and advanced towards Jherek and Amelia.

At that moment an apparition appeared at the window and drifted through. It was Bishop Castle, completely out of breath, looking extremely excited, his huge mitre askew. 'Oh, the adventures, my dears! The Lat have returned and are laying waste to *everything*! Murder, pillage, rape! It's marvellous! Ah, you have company . . .'

'I believe you've met most of them,' Jherek said. 'This is Inspector Springer, Sergeant Sherwood . . .'

Bishop Castle subsided slowly to the floor, nodding and smiling. Blinking, the constables backed away.

'They have taken *prisoners*, too. Just as they took us prisoner that time. Ah, boredom is banished at last! And there has been a *battle*—the Duke of Queens magnificent, in charge of our aerial fleet (it did not last more than a few seconds, unfortunately, but it did look pretty), and My Lady Charlolina as an amazon, in a *chariot*. Amusement returns to our dull world! Dozens, at least, are *dead*! He waved his crook apologetically at the company. 'You must forgive the interruption. I am so sorry. I forget my manners.'

'I know you,' said Inspector Springer significantly. 'I arrested you before, at the Café Royal.'

'So pleased to see you again, inspector.' It was plain that Bishop Castle had not understood a word that Inspector Springer

had said. He popped a translation pill into his mouth. 'You decided to continue your party, then, at the End of Time?'

'End of Time?' said Harold Underwood, showing fresh interest. 'Armageddon?'

Amelia Underwood went to him. She tried to soothe him. He shook her off.

'Ha!' he said.

'Harold. You're being childish.'

'Ha!'

Despondently, she remained where she was, staring at him.

'You should see the *destruction*,' continued Bishop Castle. He laughed. 'Noting at all is left of Below-the-Lake, unless Brannart's laboratories are still there. But the menagerie is completely gone, and all My Lady Charlottina's apartments – the lake itself – all gone! It'll take her hours to replace them.' He tugged at Jherek's sleeve. 'You must return with me and see the spectacle, Jherek. That's why I came away, to make sure you did not miss it all.'

'Your friends aren't going anywhere, sir. And neither, I might add, are you.' Inspector Springer signalled his constables forward.

'How wonderful! You'd take us prisoners, too! Have you any weapons, like the Lat's? You must produce something, inspector, to rival their effects, unless you wish to be absolutely outshone!'

'I thought these Latvians were on your side,' said Sergeant Sherwood.

'Indeed, no! What would be the fun of that?'

'You say they're destroying everything. Rape, pillage, murder?'

'Exactly.'

'Well, I never ...' Inspector Springer scratched his head. 'So you're merely the foils of these people, instead of the other way about?'

'I think there's a misunderstanding, inspector,' said Mrs Underwood. 'You see ...'

'Misunderstanding!' Suddenly Harold Underwood lurched towards her. 'Jezebel!'

'Harold!'

'Ha!'

There came another boom, louder than the previous ones, and the ceiling vanished to reveal the sky.

'It can only be the Lat,' said Bishop Castle, with the air of an expert. 'You really must come with me, Jherek and Amelia, unless you want to be destroyed before you have enjoyed any of the fun.' He began to lead them towards his air car at the window. 'There'll be nothing left of our world, at this rate!'

'Do they really mean to destroy you all?' asked the Time Traveller as they went by.

'I gather not. They originally came for prisoners. Mistress Christia, of course –'

this to Jherek – 'is now a captive. I think it's their habit to go about the galaxy killing the males and abducting the females.'

'You'll let them?' Mrs Underwood enquired.

'What do you mean?'

'You won't stop this?'

'Oh, eventually, I suppose we'll have to. Mistress Christia wouldn't be happy in space. Particularly if it has become as bleak as Mongrove reports.'

'What do you say, Amelia? Shall we go and watch? Join in?' Jherek wanted to know.

'Of course not.'

He suppressed his disappointment.

'Perhaps you wish *me* to be abducted by those creatures?' she said.

'Indeed, no!'

'Perhaps it would be better to return in my Chronomnibus,' suggested the Time Traveller, 'at least until –'

'Amelia?'

She shook her head. 'The circumstances are too shameful for me. Respectable society would be closed to me now.'

'Then you will stay, dearest Amelia?'

'Mr Carnelian, this is no time to continue with your pesterings. I will accept that I am an outcast, but I still have certain standards of behaviour. Besides, I am concerned for Harold. He is not himself. And for that, we are to blame. Well, perhaps not you, really – but I must accept a large share of guilt. I should have been firmer. I should not have admitted my love –' and she burst into tears.

'You do admit it, then, Amelia?'

'You are heartless, Mr Carnelian,' she sobbed, 'and scarcely tactful ...'

'Ha!' said Harold Underwood. 'It is just as well that I have already begun divorce proceedings ...'

'Excellent!' cried Jherek.

Another boom.

'My machine!' exclaimed the Time Traveller, and ran outside.

'Take cover, men,' Inspector Springer called. They all lay down.

Bishop Castle was already in his air car, surrounded by a cloud of dust. 'Are you coming, Jherek?'

'I think not, I hope you enjoy yourself, Bishop Castle.'

'I shall. I shall.' The air car began to rise, Charon's barge, into the upper atmosphere.

Only Mr and Mrs Underwood and Jherek Carnelian remained standing in the ruins of the palace. 'Come,' said Jherek to them both, 'I think I know where we can find safety.' He turned a power ring. His old air car, the locomotive, materialised. It was in gleaming red and black now, but lime-coloured smoke still puffed from its stack. 'Forgive the lack of invention,' he said to them, 'but as we are in haste ...'

'You would save Harold, too?' she said, as Jherek helped her husband aboard.

'Why not? You say you are concerned for him.' He grinned cheerfully, while overhead a searing scarlet bolt of pure energy went roaring by. 'Besides, I wish to hear the details of this divorce he plans. Is that not the ceremony that must take place before we can be married?'

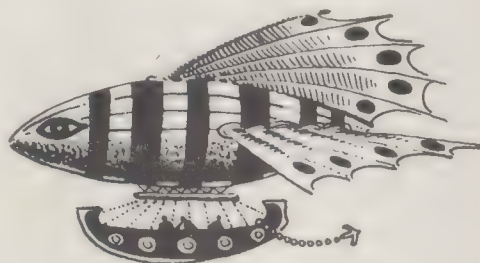
She made no reply to this as she joined him on the footplate. 'Where are we going, Mr Carnelian?'

The locomotive began to puff skyward. 'I'm full of old smokies,' he sang. 'I'm covered in dough. I've eaten blue plovers and I'm snorting up coke!' Mr Underwood clutched the rail and stared down at the ruins they left behind. His knees were shaking. 'It's a railroad song from your own time,' Jherek explained. 'Would you like to be the fireman?'

He offered Mr Underwood the platinum shovel. Mr Underwood accepted the shovel without a word and, mechanically, began to stoke coal into the fire-chamber.

'Mr Carnelian! Where are we going?'

'To certain safety, dearest Amelia. To certain safety, I assure you.'



*In Which Jherek Carnelian and
Mrs Underwood Find Sanctuary of
Sorts, and Mr Underwood Makes
a New Friend*

'You are not disturbed, dearest Amelia, by this city?'

'I find the place improbable. I failed to realise, listening only to talk of such settlements, how vast and how, well, how unlike cities they were!'

Mr Underwood stood some distance away, on the other side of the little plaza. Green globes of fuzzy light, about the size of tennis balls, ran up and down his outstretched arms; he watched them with child-like delight; behind him the air was black, purple, dark green shot with crimson, as chemicals expanded and contracted in a kind of simulation of breathing, giving off their vapours; bronze sparks showered nearby, pinkish energy arced from one tower to another; steel sang. The city murmured to itself, almost asleep, certainly drowsy. Even the narrow rivulets of mercury, criss-crossing the ground at their feet, seemed to be running slowly.

'The cities protect themselves,' Jherek explained. 'I have seen it before. No weapon can operate within them, no weapon can harm them from without, because they can always command more energy than any weapon brought against them, you see. It was part of their original design.'

'This resembles a manufactory more than it does a township,' she remarked.

'It is actually,' he told her, 'more in the nature of a museum. There are several such cities on the planet; they contain what remains of our knowledge.'

'These fumes - are they not poisonous?'

'Not to Man. They could not be.'

She accepted his assurance, but continued wary as he led them from the plaza through an arcade of lurid yellow and mauve metallic fronds, faintly reminiscent of those they had seen in the Palaeozoic; a strange greyish light fell through the fronds and distorted their shadows. Mr Underwood wandered some distance behind them, softly singing.

'We must consider,' she whispered, 'how Harold is to be saved.'

'Saved for what?'

'From his insanity.'

'He seems happier, in the city.'

'He believes himself in Hell, no doubt. Just as I once believed. Inspector Springer should never have brought him.'

'I am not altogether sure that the inspector is quite himself.'

'I agree, Mr Carnelian. All this smacks of political panic at home. There is thought to be considerable interest in Spiritualism and Freemasonry among

certain members of the Cabinet, at the present time. There is even some talk that the Prince of Wales . . .'

She continued in this vein for a while, mystifying him entirely. Her information, he gathered, was gleaned from a broadsheet which Mr Underwood had once acquired.

The arcade gave way to a chasm running between high, featureless buildings, their walls covered with chemical stains and peculiar semi-biological growths, some of which palpitated; ahead of them was something globular, glowing and black, which rolled away from them as they advanced and, as they reached the end of the chasm, vanished. Here the vista widened and they could see across a plain littered with half-rotted metal relics to where, in the distance, angry flames spread themselves against an invisible wall.

'There!' he said. 'That must be the Lat's weapons at work. The city throws up its defences. See, I told you that we should be safe, dear Amelia.'

She glanced over her shoulder to where her husband sat upon a structure that seemed part of stone and part of some kind of hardened resin. 'I wish you would try to be more tactful, Mr Carnelian. Remember that my husband is within earshot. Consider his feelings, if you will not consider mine!'

'But he has relinquished you to me. He said as much. By your customs that is sufficient, is it not?'

'He divorces me, that is all. I have a right to choose or reject any husband I please.'

'Of course. But you choose me. I know.'

'I have not told you that.'

'You have, Amelia. You forget. You have mentioned more than once that you love me.'

'That does not mean - would not mean - that I would necessarily marry you, Mr Carnelian. There is still every chance that I may return to Bromley - or at least to my own time.'

'Where you will be an outcast. You said so.'

'In Bromley. Not everywhere.' But she frowned. 'I can imagine the scandal. The newspapers will have published something, to be sure. Oh, dear.'

'You seemed to be enjoying life at the End of Time.'

'Perhaps I would continue to do so, Mr Carnelian, were I not haunted, very definitely, by the Past.' Another glance over her shoulder. 'How is one ever to relax?'

'This is a fluke. It is the first time anything like it has ever occurred here.'

'Besides, I would remind you that, according to Bishop Castle (not to mention the evidence of your own eyes), your world is being destroyed about your ears.'

'For the moment, only. It can soon be replaced.'

'Lord Mongrove and Yusharisp would have us believe otherwise.'

'It is hard to take them seriously.'

'For you, perhaps. Not for me, Mr Carnelian. What they say makes considerable sense.'

'*Opportunities for redemption must therefore be few in such an ambience as you describe,*' said quite another voice, a low, mellow, slightly sleepy voice.

'There are none,' said Mr Underwood, 'at least that I know of.'

'*That is interesting. I seem to recall something of the theory, but most of the information I would require was stored elsewhere, in a sister city, whose co-ordinates I cannot quite recollect. I am of a mind to believe, however, that you are either a manifestation of this city's delusions (which proliferate notoriously, these days) or else that you are deluded yourself, a victim of too much morbid fascination with ancient mythologies, I could be mistaken - there was a time when I was infallible, I think. I am not sure that your description of this city tallies with the facts which remain at my command. You could argue, I know, that I myself am deluded as to the truth, yet my evidence would seem to tally with my instincts, whereas you yourself make intellectual rather than instinctive assumptions; that, at least, is what I gather from the illogicalities so far expressed in your analysis. You have contradicted yourself at least three times since you sat down on my shell.*'

It was the compound of rock and resin that spoke. 'One form of memory bank,' murmured Jherek. 'There are so many kinds, not always immediately recognisable.'

'*I think,*' continued the bank, '*that you are still confused and have not yet ordered your thoughts sufficiently to communicate properly with me. I assure you that I will function much more satisfactorily if you phrase your remarks better.*'

Mr Underwood did not seem offended by this criticism. 'I think you are right,' he said. 'I am confused. Well, I am mad, to be blunt.'

'*Madness may only be the expression of ordinary emotional confusion. Fear of madness can cause, I believe, a retreat into the very madness one fears. This is only superficially a paradox. Madness may be said to be a tendency to simplify, into easily grasped metaphors, the nature of the world. In your own case, you have plainly been confounded by unexpected complexities, therefore you are inclined to retreat into simplification - this talk of Damnation and Hell, for instance - to create a world whose values are unambiguous, unequivocal. It is a pity that so*

few of my own ancestors survive, for they, by their very nature, would have responded better to your views. On the other hand, it may be that you are not content with this madness, that you would rather face the complexities, feel at ease with them. If so, I am sure that I can help, in a small way.'

'You are very kind,' said Mr Underwood.

'Nonsense, I am glad to be of service, I have had nothing to do for the best part of a million years. I was in danger of growing "rusty". Luckily, having no mechanical parts, I can remain dormant for a long time without any especially deleterious effects. Though, as part of a very complex system, there is much information I can no longer call upon.'

'Then you are of the opinion that this is not the afterlife, that I am not here as punishment for my sins, that I shall not be here for eternity, that I am not, as it were, dead?'

'You are certainly not dead, for you can still converse, feel, think and experience physical needs and discomforts...'

The bank had a penchant for abstract conversation which seemed to suit Mr Underwood, though Jherek and Amelia became quickly bored listening to it. 'It reminds me of an old schoolmaster I once had,' she whispered, and she grinned. 'It is just what Harold needs, really, at present.'

The vivid splashes of light no longer spread across the horizon, and the scene darkened. No sun could be observed in the lurid sky, across which clouds of queerly coloured gases perpetually drifted. Behind them, the city seemed to stir, shuddering with age and strain, groaning almost complainingly.

'What would happen to you if your cities collapsed?' she asked him.

'That is impossible. They are self-perpetuating.'

'There is no evidence of that.' Even as she spoke, two of the metallic structures fell into the dust and became dust themselves.

'Yet they are,' he told her. 'In their own way. They have been like this for millennia, somehow surviving. We see only the surface. The essence of the cities is not so tangible, and that is as robust as ever.'

She accepted what he said with a shrug. 'How long must we remain here, then?'

'You sought escape from the Lat, did you not? We remain here until the Lat leave the planet.'

'You do not know when that will be?'

'It will be soon, I am sure. Either they will become bored with the game or we will. Then the game will end.'

'With how many dead?'

'None, I hope.'

'You can resurrect everyone?'

'Certainly.'

'Even the denizens of your menageries?'

'Not all. It depends how solidly they have made an impression on our own memories, you see. Our rings work from our minds, to achieve the reconstructions.'

She did not pursue the topic. 'We seem as thoroughly marooned now at the End of Time as we did at the Beginning,' she said moodily. 'How few are our moments of ordinary living...'

'That will change. These are particularly agitated days. Brannart explained that the chronological fluctuations are unusually persistent. We must all agree to stop travelling through time for a while, then everything will be back to normal.'

'I admire your optimism, Mr Carnelian.'

'Thank you, Amelia.' He began to walk again. 'This is the very city where I was conceived, the Iron Orchid told me. With some difficulty, it seems.'

She looked back. Mr Underwood still sat upon the memory bank, deep in conversation. 'Should we leave him?'

'We can return for him later.'

'Very well.'

They stepped upon thin silver surfaces which creaked as they crossed, but did not crack. They ascended a flight of ebony stairs, towards an ornamental bridge.

'It would seem fitting,' said Jherek, 'if I were to propose formally to you here, Amelia, as my father proposed to my mother.'

'Your father?'

'A mystery my mother chooses to perpetuate.'

'So you do not know who-?'

'I do not.'

She pursed her lips. 'In Bromley such a fact would be sufficient to put a complete bar on marriage, you know.'

'Truly?'

'Oh, yes.' Then she added; 'But we are not in Bromley...'

He smiled. 'Indeed, we are not.'

'However...'

'I understand.'

'Please, continue...'

'I was saying that it would seem fitting that I should ask you, here in this city where I was conceived, for your hand in marriage.'

'Should I ever be free to give it, you mean?'

'Exactly.'

'Well, Mr Carnelian, I cannot say that this is sudden. But...'

'Mibix dug frishy hrunt!' said a familiar voice, and across the bridge came marching Captain Mubbers and his men, armed to the teeth and looking not a little put out.



END OF PART TWO

Apart from Alfred Austin's, all verses quoted in the text are the work of Ernest Wheldrake. The majority are from Posthumous Poems published in 1881 and never reprinted.

LANDSCAPES OF THE MIND

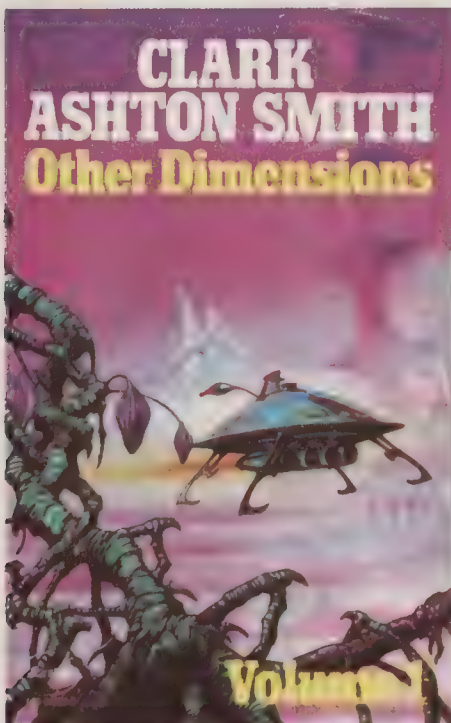
An interview with
**Rodney
Matthews**
by Steve Axtell

Rodney Matthews' style is distinctive and appealing. His work is used widely for posters and album sleeves. In this article are presented his illustrations for the album *Yellow Bird Is Dead*, and *The Twilight Tower*. The latter is available as a large poster, published by Big O Posters – a series he has recently completed illustrating some of Michael Moorcock's fiction. Other pictures here are taken from a semi-animated film, yet to be completed. Artwork and the story will later be published in book form. Matthews has recently completed three Moorcock-book dust-jacket illustrations – *Legends From The End Of Time*, *The Transformation Of Miss Mavis Ming* (W. H. Allen), and *The End Of All Songs* to be published by Granada later this year. Other notable works are of course the covers for the first three issues of VORTEX.





Yellow Bird is Dead (record sleeve)



△ The Twilight Tower (poster)

◁ Other Dimensions (book cover) by permission of Granada Publishing



VORTEX: Well, Rodney Matthews, how long have you been into SF and Fantasy artwork?

MATTHEWS: The last eight years. I became disillusioned with the advertising agency where I was working in Bristol. I was really living one huge lie. Somehow I stuck it out.

VORTEX: Did you decide when you were very young that you wanted to be an artist?

MATTHEWS: Ambition-wise, I was by no means sure what was going to happen. Basically I could've ended up as an artist, a musician or a farmer.

VORTEX: Farmer? Do you like the countryside?

MATTHEWS: Yes, I appreciate natural things, as you can probably see from my illustrations. I enjoy drawing animals. I prefer to work from the country, because I'm a bit of a nervous person, and I can't get down to work in a place like London.

VORTEX: Well, you became an artist and not a farmer. How did that happen?

MATTHEWS: When I left school, the art mistress and everyone were all saying, "You must become an artist or something." So I went around to the local print factory, where they offered me a job as a retoucher. Then I thought, "Christ, I can't sit and do this all day." So I went on to do some metal working, taking the surface off a thumb, slitting the odd finger here and there, so I thought, "Christ, I can't do this." And I ended up at the West of England Art College, which I left prematurely after one and a half years because a job came up. Although I didn't like it, the period which then followed at the ad agency was important because there I learned the basic disciplines — creative lettering, layout, presentation, visualizing, typography and something of printing.

After leaving the ad agency, I went to work as a freelancer, in an outfit called PLASTIC DOG GRAPHICS. Here were laid the foundations on which I have built my style and direction. To start with I had to do a lot of mediocre stuff in order to make a living, but every now and then a job (usually a college poster or a record sleeve) would present me with an outlet for my fantasies. My partner and me were currently playing in bands, so it wasn't surprising that much of our graphic work came from the musical business. Notably United Artists and Sonet of Sweden. Sonet together with its several small subsidiaries, and headed in London by Rod Buckle, produced mainly Jazz, Blues and Folk albums. I was invited to design the covers for many of these. In fact, a lot of my

stuff has come about by being rejected by record companies or bands or what have you. My poster "The Last Armada" was originally intended for a Stackridge album to be called 'It seemed a good idea at the time'. 'In Search of Forever' I did for Mike Dolan, who at the time was manager of Magna Carta, but it got sent back without getting as far as being seen by the band. My space-craft thing, "Space Hijack" (then titled "Sea of Stars") was for SASSAFRAS, but I don't think the band saw that either.

VORTEX: Do you make a habit of keeping all your rejected material?

MATTHEWS: Yes. I've got a big stash of tracings I can use one day because I think that if it's worth using in the first place, then in a couple of years' time, and with a few alterations, then it'll be worth using again. There's a poster floating about now which I originally discarded without getting any further than a black/white outline. I threw it behind some stuff in the studio because at that time I didn't think it was going to make much of an illustration. Then one day I was sitting about with not a hell of a lot to do, so I got back on it, doing an hour's work now and then for the following three years. Eventually Peter Ledebor (Big O Posters) said, "Well, I can use that as a poster." I still didn't think it would make much of a poster, though I thought it'd be okay if I reduced it. It turned out okay.

VORTEX: What got you into goblins and fantasy illustrations?

MATTHEWS: My friends went through a phase when they were all reading Tolkien, and everybody was saying to me, "You must read this 'Lord of the Rings'." But I was determined not to read it just because they were all talking about it. It came to pass that I was stranded in Pembrokeshire in the rain for a week, and there was this dog-eared copy of 'The Hobbit' being booted about. So I read it.

I find that I can be there in Tolkien's world. I can visualise the landscapes from the descriptions. Fantasy appeals to me. There are times when I can't take the realistic side of life. Then I daydream. Maybe it's selfish that, rather than getting down and trying to alter things like some people do, I steer away from it all for my own little trip. I'm becoming a bit of a hermit, really.

VORTEX: Do you read much?

MATTHEWS: Obviously I read the books I have to illustrate, both to be fair to the author and also to get the best situation on which to base the picture. I haven't read a lot until recently.

VORTEX: When you illustrate a book cover, do you try and convey a general impression of the story?

MATTHEWS: No. With a book jacket design, I take a specific set of circumstances from the book and illustrate it to the best of my understanding.

VORTEX: And do you conceive the entire picture at once, or do you start doodling and suddenly realise that you've drawn whatever it is?

MATTHEWS: It depends on the mood I'm in. Sometimes I need to sit and scribble for about three hours before anything materialises. At other times, I walk about in the countryside with dog and spotted handkerchief gathering mushrooms. That's when I think most of these things up, when there're no distractions. In essence, I build the thing up in my mind then, and refer back to the book later for detail.

VORTEX: Some authors say that the artist cannot go as far as the writer because when people read the paragraph, it's all in the reader's mind, and they can make it as fantastic as they want. I'd comment that your Moorcock posters go further than what Moorcock makes me think up, and you're not placing limitations upon me.

MATTHEWS: But when you apply something to paper like this you commit yourself to criticism from all angles. No two people conjure the same visual images. I build up a general conception, scribble it down, make sure that I've got all the details right, and then I look at it as one entity which can be marketed, in this case a poster. And I'll say, "Well, this tower look a bit dumpy as I've drawn it. I'll make it a bit more slender, give it a bit more of a point, and make it all a bit more fantastic." Certain things about the "Twilight Tower" are unsaid in the book (Moorcock's *The Shores of Death*), which is where I step in with my own creativity.

VORTEX: What are your chief artistic influences? What Great Masters impress you most?

MATTHEWS: Great Masters? Dunno about Great Masters. If you want me to mention names, my favourites would come from very different sources Bosch, Richard Dadd, Rackham, Dulac etc. Frank Frazetta is 'God' at the moment as far as I'm concerned. I'm inclined towards technique although I like paintings with Soul as well. Margritte's work I admire very much. I tend to be influenced by little bits from each thing that I like. I take in from everyone. Even a rotten artist has something to say, there's always something

you can appreciate. But when you start mentioning names, people try and put you into a category. No doubt I've got a category, but I don't like people talking about where they think I've cribbed things from. I try not to crib from anywhere, but inevitably you are impressed by something and it comes out later, unconsciously.

VORTEX: Are you constantly trying to produce better posters?

MATTHEWS: I use the same ingredients, but I'm less easily satisfied now. There are some things I do which I look back on a couple of months later and want to ring up the printer and say "Don't print it."

VORTEX: Presumably you get turned down now and then?

MATTHEWS: Yes. Sometimes I get depressed about it, but I walk it off as much as possible. (I also get jobs that I don't really want, but it'd be silly to turn these down; one has, after all, to earn a crust.) I was almost bodily thrown out of a gallery in Bristol (Mentioning no names) a couple of years ago, because my work was too 'commercial'. This gallery tends to hang pieces of string, all of different lengths, around the walls. That's the kind of place it is, you know.

VORTEX: Yes, you've got to be an intellectual to take that in.

MATTHEWS: I think so. You've got to be pretty much a 'wizard of the bullshit' to sell it as well. Actually, the guy who selects the stuff for display is by his own admission a failed commercial artist.

VORTEX: Maybe that's why he doesn't like you! You're not an intellectual, then? Have you got an 'O' level in art?

MATTHEWS: No, nothing like that. It's a bit of a bee in my bonnet in fact. The other day my ex-partner came along with some amazing drawings, remarkably photographic. He told me they were done by a sixteen-year-old kid who's just left school and has been refused entrance to Art College because he's got no 'levels'. That really pissed me off. I personally conned my way into Art College with some bird paintings (herons, long-eared owls etc). It was just after that, that this regulation about 'O' levels came about. I'm thinking of writing off to the principal because it's amazing the talent this kid's got, and he's getting no support from the people who *should* know about art.

VORTEX: What about the future?

MATTHEWS: I'm working on something at the moment, sort of off and on, which is a film involving this style of illustration. I've got some friends who've 'threatened' to come along and supply the odd chord

of music here and there. The final result of something involving music and graphics could be very satisfying. I'd get lots more fulfilment from it. Then I thought, why not make a book out of it? But then I was descended upon by people wanting book jackets, so I'm back there.

VORTEX: HAWKWIND, on stage, play with large graphic displays on a screen behind them. Is that what you'd like to do?

MATTHEWS: Yes, that appeals to me. I'd like to design sets for bands on stage, time permitting. I envy Roger Dean in this for the way he's had the opportunity to do a lot with YES, stage props and so on, which've been seen by a large audience. I rate Roger's conceptions very highly. As far as my own opportunities are concerned I have quite often brought people's attention to my work by sending samples to them, although I'm a bit embarrassed about doing this uninvited. I'd rather be a bit subdued and wait for people to come to me. But in the first place it was "Show people your work or starve". Even if only one person in three months says, "I quite like your stuff," it does make you feel it's worth carrying on.

VORTEX: So your advice to a young artist would be to keep sending material out.

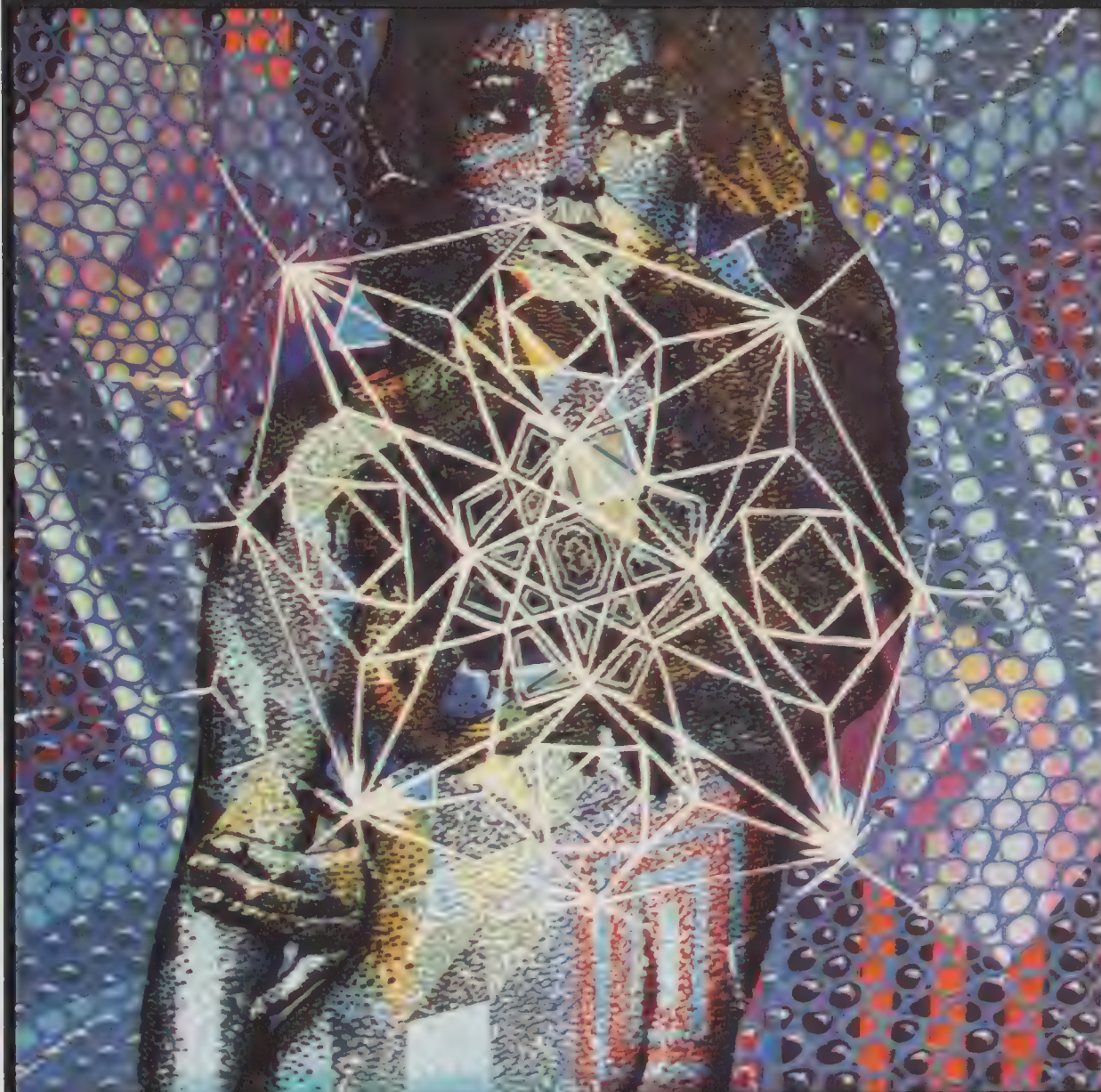
MATTHEWS: Yes, if they're confident it's good stuff. You should take all sorts of work to begin with and get into all aspects. Record sleeves give you practice of layout, typesetting and illustration, or maybe directing a photographic session. You should have a certain knowledge of all these things and you keep on learning.

VORTEX: Rodney Matthews, thank you.

* * * *

MUTANT

James Corley



Half-way up the hill, exhaustion forced Stoddard to rest. He chose a boulder of suitable size and sat down. His head swam dizzily as he bent to untie his laces. Once off he placed the scuffed and cracked boots carefully beside him. As usual they exuded an ammoniacal stench of sweat; the heat would soon dry them out.

There was no shade at all on the hill. Sinking in the west the sun was still an unbearable white glare hanging over the ocean and sadistically refusing to set. He fumbled through his pockets and found a salt tablet to swallow.

From this high up Stoddard could look down over the marine research station he nominally controlled, and past it to the beaches at the southern end of the island. A red stain of vegetation had crept up onto the beach from the sea. He noted apathetically that it had failed to establish much of a foothold on the land as yet. A week ago there had been nothing at all on the island except a scattering of scrubby green. Not enough water, that was the reason. This far out in the Indian Ocean there was little atmospheric turbulence. Apart from its single hill the island was low-lying; the hill wasn't big enough to precipitate rain except during the two monsoon weeks. Perhaps the new vegetation didn't need water. No, even in this age of biological impossibilities, *that* was impossible, Stoddard thought wearily. It must have a root system down into the sea. Seaweed. Of a sort. Tomorrow, next week, sometime — he'd go down and investigate. Before someone got at it with a flamethrower. The problem raced through his head like a fever delirium, racing in superficial circles. Deep down the real mind only looked at it, uninvolved, uncaring and totally bewildered.

It took a conscious effort of will to get his boots back on and start climbing the hill again.

The previous Director had decided that his status demanded a residence some distance away from the old RAF base that now housed the research institute. In those days there had been petrol for the Land Rover but when Stoddard was appointed he hadn't liked the isolation. It had been convenient to let Pamela Barnett take the bungalow over — until the supplies had stopped coming and the heat had grown so intense. Now it was too much effort climbing the hill. Small wonder she hadn't reported for work.

The bungalow was built of pre-fabricated wooden sections. Finding the door ajar he went in without knocking. Inside, the drawn curtains provided shade but little respite from the heat. Hearing sounds from the kitchen he went through. She was at the sink, washing plates. The detached part of his mind critically noted that she hadn't bothered to be economical with the water. Pumping water up from the desalination and sterilisation plant was expensive.

"Hullo," he said.

"Hi, Ted." She acknowledged his presence and identity without turning from the sink. Her voice was unwelcoming. Maybe she's ill, he thought.

"Do you think the sun's getting any worse?" he asked. It was an awkward, meaningless question. If the sun exploded it would be no worse than it was now.

"How should I know?"

He changed tack. "I was worried when you didn't show up this morning."

"Manji can get along without me. There's nothing to do anyway."

"I'd have said there was everything to do. We have to get

those tanks producing soon."

"We don't have to do anything," she said listlessly.

He crossed the kitchen and put his arms around her, cupping her breasts in his hands and pressing her body into his. She reacted violently, pushing his away and turning to face him. "It's got to end. I've decided. Sorry, Ted."

"This is very sudden, isn't it?" he asked, not believing her.

She started washing plates again, noisily. "If you must know I've run out of pills. I can't take the chance of getting pregnant."

Stoddard was offended. "I didn't come up here to go to bed with you. Not just that anyway. There's no need to treat me like a potential rapist."

"Why pretend?" she asked. Her voice stayed flat. "No sex means nothing left. So now it's over and I feel like being left alone. All right by you, Mr Stoddard?"

"I know you're under a strain," Stoddard said slowly. "We all are. But we stand a better chance of surviving if we stick together."

Emotion came into her voice. Sarcasm. "Lucky me. Someone wants to stick by me in my hour of need. The whole world's falling on its arse but you and me can stand up to it if we stick together. Is that it?"

"Yes, that's it. It's something we have to hope for."

"Balls."

He slapped her face with the flat of his hand. Hard. "Snap out of it." He recognised hysteria welling in her expression.

The knife was suddenly in her hand — snatched from the draining board. A large, clean, sharp knife. "Keep away from me. Understand? Stop bothering me."

He backed away under threat of the knife. "You're upset, that's all, Pamela. You know you don't mean it."

"I don't know anything. Why did your wife run away to America?" She asked the question cruelly. Meaning to wound with it.

He felt a flush of embarrassment replacing the sudden, half-welcome chill of fear that the knife had aroused. Part of his mind still observed the clumsy, mechanical actions of his personality with dispassion. He talked to calm her. "She was offered a better job at U.C.L.A. I was still in London. The marriage just fell apart. It was a long time ago."

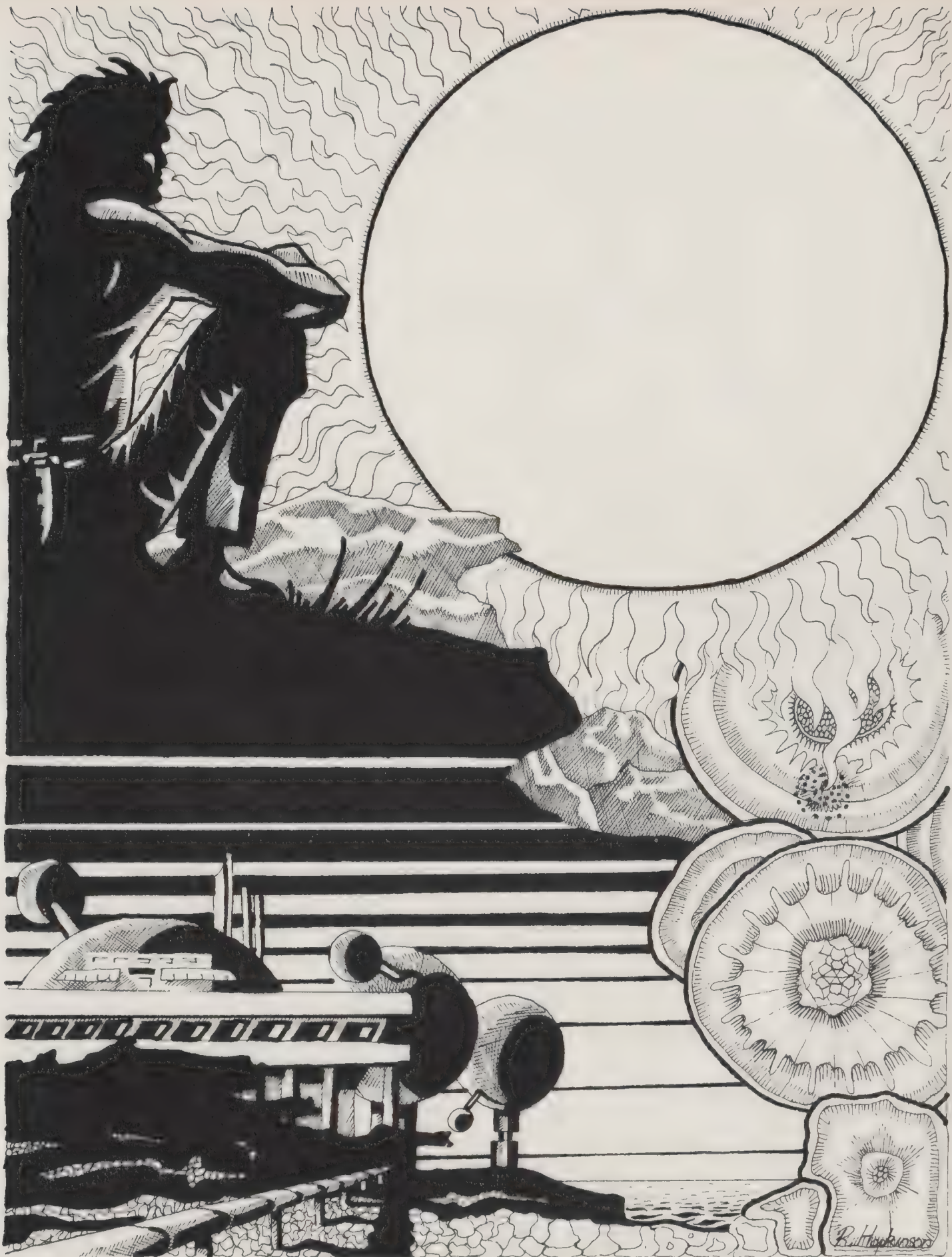
"Funny that. I was at U.C.L.A. Is that why you hired me, Ted? What U.C.L.A. takes away U.C.L.A. shall be made to give back? Did you pick on me to make up for your wife? Any lay as long as it's a lay from U.C.L.A.?"

He fumbled for something to say. Some defence. "All right. If that's the way you want it. But I still need you at the station. I hope you'll have calmed down enough to come into work tomorrow."

Stoddard left with as much dignity as he could muster. It wasn't enough.

For two years the sun had been pouring out an increase of radiation on every spectral band, peaking in the ultraviolet and upwards in frequency. The solar wind was now a hurricane, a sleet of atomic particles travelling at one million miles an hour hit the upper layers of the atmosphere and rained a torrent of high energy alpha-particles. It didn't kill, not immediately. But it was intense enough to mangle genes. A secret and patient torturer.

At the bottom of the hill Stoddard collapsed from heat exhaustion. He lay for over two hours in the direct rays of the sun before one of the men from the station found him. It was a week before he was fully rational again. Large, stiff blisters encrusted the side of his face that had been exposed.



II

"Feeling better?" asked Manji as he came into the Director's bedroom. The room was almost dark, the blinds at the windows of the hut drawn. The fans whirled loudly in the ceiling, sending draughts of trapped heat rushing about the airless room.

"You should have followed Miss Barnett's example and stayed indoors. You Europeans are too fair skinned for this climate now. I swear it's getting worse," Manji said.

Stoddard stayed flat on his back on the bed. "The sun?" Of course the sun. What else did anyone ever talk about now?

"It's just my imagination I expect." Manji pulled a chair to the bedside and sat on it.

"Miss Barnett hasn't reported back to work?"

"Don't worry. We can manage without her. It's crazy her trying to make that trip every day."

"She could move down here," Stoddard said brusquely.

Manji made a mock expression of horror in the gloom. "She's a woman. She needs her privacy. Haven't you ever remarked how much more private women always are in a hot climate? We never integrated the sexes in India like you did in Europe."

"Don't you ever take anything seriously?" Stoddard asked irritably.

"We Indians are taught that the material world is illusion. Nothing more. It may not be true, but it's a comforting doctrine all the same."

Stoddard pulled himself up in the bed angrily. "I didn't like the way you used the past tense about Europe either."

Manji stopped smiling. "A figure of speech, I'm just making conversation. India would go first."

"How are the men taking it?" Stoddard had never mixed much with the others on the island.

"As before. Fatalistic. We're used to disaster." Like Manji the rest of the staff were Indian nationals.

"Not on this scale," Stoddard said.

"Big or small, if you or your family are dead what difference does it make?"

"You're not used to disaster, Manji. Your family has always had enough money to protect itself." The Mercedes contract in Bombay he remembered.

"Yet they lived in India, in close proximity to all those centuries of drought and famine. Something's bound to rub off."

"You were brought up and educated in England though. Are you inured to the end of the world?" Stoddard asked insistently.

Manji shook off the seriousness and laughed lightly. "I must retain a certain fatalism in my blood. It's no use worrying about such things. Best to think of it all as illusion. How's your face?"

"Bloody sore."

"It'll wear off. If you stay indoors."

"There's too much to do. I'll wear a hat."

"Take it easy. Leave it to me. I have everything under control."

"The algae tanks?"

"Coming along fine. We won't starve."

Stoddard lapsed back onto his bed. It was true, Manji could look after things on his own. He was a better biologist than Stoddard had ever been. That was the reason why Stoddard was Director, he'd been kicked upstairs out of the way of the workers. There was nothing for a Director to do now that communications with the mainland were cut. No budgets to negotiate, no supplies to order, no-one to write reports to.

Manji was attempting to farm algae in the large abandoned

fuel tanks under the old RAF base. Hopefully they were far enough underground to shield out most of the high energy rays the sun threw out. With luck the algae wouldn't mutate and would remain edible. Manji was right, if anyone could keep them from starving, he could. There was still a few months supply of tins in store anyway.

Manji evidently felt he'd stayed long enough. He stood up. "You'll be all right now then?" he inquired.

"I'll be fine. Thanks, Manji."

"I'll send a man across with some food later."

"I'll make it across to the canteen," Stoddard said defiantly.

III

The last link between the isolated marine research station and the mainland had been broken four months before. It had come suddenly and almost without warning. The last supply plane had landed on the tenth of November. Stoddard had an arrangement with the pilot, a young flight lieutenant of the Indian Air Force, who brought in the odd, unofficial bottle of gin on his monthly flights. The pilot was never in any rush to get back into the air. Usually he sat with the Director for a few hours sharing the bottle.

"Things are under control," the flight lieutenant said confidently. "I read in the papers this morning that world food supplies will only be cut by thirty per cent according to official estimates. The fall-short isn't comfortable of course, we'll loose several millions through starvation, but that's tolerable. If they all keep their heads."

"But the rice and wheat crops must still be mutating," objected Stoddard.

The pilot shrugged. "The military government has reassured the public that the mutation isn't as serious as was thought at first. Most countries are suspending cattle and pig farming for the time being while they try to find a way to genetically stabilise the animals."

"That should help things temporarily," Stoddard said. Sipping his gin the young man nodded confident agreement.

The pilot left as the sun was beginning to sink below the horizon. He was slightly too drunk to fly safely. It was the last they saw of him.

On November the fourteenth the short wave set in the common-room had picked up an English language broadcast. Which station was broadcasting was obscure. The solar wind ripped vast holes in the ionosphere. Stations tended to switch wavelengths in an uncontrolled fashion trying to find the one that was momentarily best. It had been the content of the broadcast that was important. A report on the Geneva Symposium on Solar Activity. A lone Frenchman who declared the sun was in the process of going nova was shouted down. The American delegation had stated the phenomenon was short lived and normalcy would soon be resumed. When Academician Sarnov stood up and asked what evidence they had for this opinion the Americans supplied a long answer which repeated what they'd said and added nothing. Academician Sarnov had then claimed that the anomalous solar activity was due to a NASA experiment on the corona in which a ton of titanium pellets had been dropped into the sun. The Americans denied all knowledge of the experiment. Academician Sarnov declared it was yet another example of Imperialist meddling contrary to the interests of the peoples of the world. On November the

fifteenth twenty-two American embassies were razed in various countries. The radio reported that seven more countries went under military control within the space of twenty-four hours. Food riots, political riots and Anti-American riots were universal by the eighteenth. On the nineteenth, static on the radio became worse than ever. It hardly mattered. There were no more broadcasts.

Almost immediately rumours of a nuclear war circulated among the men on the island. Stoddard had tried unsuccessfully to squash the rumours. There was no basis for them he told Manji. Manji was a cheerful supporter of the theory. They had argued publicly in the canteen.

"The Russians and the French have attacked America," Manji said. "And the Americans have retaliated. Armageddon has happened."

"It's far more likely that the various military governments have decided to stop public broadcasting to conserve energy."

Manji fended the postulate with logic. "There is no shortage of electricity, only of edible foodstuffs. Electricity isn't edible."

"They may have done it as a gesture. To emphasise the need for restraint in other areas. Or even to stop all these wild stories about the American experiments spreading."

"Then we should still be able to pick up military broadcasts. They wouldn't stop those," Manji replied forcefully.

"You know what reception's like. There could be any amount of radio activity going on. We just can't hear it for the static."

"I think the world is dead outside of this island." Manji's words cut through the room that had gone silent as men listened to the row.

"That's ridiculous and defeatist," Stoddard stated loudly. He began to get worried about order breaking down in the station. Visions of hopeless anarchy came to him.

Manji seemed unmoved by the prospect. "It might be for the best. All the seed plants are mutating because of the sun's rays. The climate has changed in any case, that must have decimated the harvests. The fast breeding animals are mutating. Look at the fish we've been getting out of the sea, the last we caught had two heads. It's simply a matter of time before long gestating animals like man show signs of wide-spread mutation. All this talk about solving the problem is propaganda, nothing more. The problem is too big. The human race is finished, we simply have to accept it. Who wants to carry on anyway when the next generation will be a collection of abortions and still-born monstrosities? You know anything born that lives will be a circus freak."

"Then why are you still working here?" Stoddard asked angrily. "Why not just give up now?"

"I keep myself busy. I have to do something. I survive."

Stoddard walked out of the canteen shaking. By morning the whole thing was forgotten. If the world had ended, people pretended not to have noticed.

IV

A stench like a combination of yeast and decaying fish permeated the southern end of the island as work progressed on the algae tanks. The nauseous miasma rose in the heat and hung in the still, humid atmosphere.

"It won't taste as bad as it smells," Manji promised.

"I hope not."

"Do you think it's wise to walk around in this temperature?" Manji asked, wiping sweat off his shining forehead.

"I'm not spending the rest of my life locked up in my room," Stoddard replied. "It's all right for you, you've got something to do. I'm bored."

"Why don't you join our bridge club in the evenings?" Manji offered.

"I hate bridge. I was never good at card games."

"Learning the game would give you something to do."

"Don't you have a pair of binoculars about somewhere?" Stoddard asked. "Can I borrow them?"

"Certainly. Are you studying . . .?"

"Bird watching," Stoddard said. "It used to be my hobby once. I'm going to take it up again."

"Be careful," Manji warned. "Don't pass out like you did before. We might not find you next time."

Stoddard shrugged. "I'll wear my hat."

Stoddard had always been a late riser, but he began to set his alarm-clock to wake himself before dawn. The early morning was cooler. The hours between six and nine were almost tolerable. There was time enough to walk two miles and back. The north end of the island had been untouched by the comings and goings of man over the years. The terrain was rocky and fell in low cliffs to the beaches and the vast green ocean. Stoddard knew there had once been a transitory colony of sea birds here. He felt a mixture of revulsion and curiosity as he investigated the guano-spattered rocks to see what had happened to them.

The homogenous flocks of white feathered gulls had disappeared. In their place were individual birds which belonged to no known genus. The sports mostly kept to themselves, only infrequently could Stoddard find a pair close enough together in appearance to form a mating bond. Elsewhere piles of bloody feathers showed where fighting had broken out as it had become more difficult to identify between friend and foe, or where hunger for the altering food supply had caused an unnaturally savage reaction.

In the first three days of his coming to the rocks Stoddard spotted twenty birds. Sixteen of them resembled nothing he'd seen before. Most had retained the white plumage of their original species but two at least had mutated into peacock coloured dandies. Others showed morphological differentiation. Tail feathers had developed into two foot long fans which stopped the bird from flying. Beaks had curved into parrot-like monstrosities, wings had atrophied until the bird resembled a miniature parody of an albino penguin. The tide mark was lined with other things. Things that had crawled out of the sea following some archetypal evolutionary impulse and found their adaptation unsuccessful.

On the fourth morning Stoddard saw something else. A figure lying on the beach in the distance. He raised his binoculars to study it. The figure lay face down, but from the curve of the buttocks it could only be a woman. Pamela Barnett. She was naked, her outstretched arms and legs tanned a deep brown, the rest of her body burnt a lurid red by the vicious ultraviolet. The knowledge that she must be dead washed through him accompanied by a physical sensation as if his viscera were draining from his body.

She turned over. His mind lurched again as it was forced to accept her insanity. It was suicide for her to sunbathe now.

He began to run forward along the cliff top to a point where he could descend to the beach, he wanted to warn her of the danger, the probability of heat stroke and heart failure, the certainty that in a year or two at most skin cancers would

develop.

He came to a sudden halt, binoculars banging against his chest. She knew the dangers as well as he did.

The next morning she was on the beach again. Almost as if she had slept there. He stood at the same place on the cliff-top and watched through Manji's binoculars. The sight of her naked body aroused no sexual pleasure. The scene held only the kind of fascination he had felt as a child when once he'd spied on the mysterious world of adults. There had been a secret hiding place behind the settee in the living room. He'd been five, maybe six, no older. He recognised the sensation now; he hadn't then of course. It was the knowledge that their behaviour, however strange, was also contained in his own self but somehow held from his understanding by unknown rules.

Stoddard had been kept awake most of the night thinking of the figure on the beach, pulling at the desperate problem she posed. He had decided against the theory that this was a macabre form of suicide. Her body had flared into a vivid redness but there was no blistering of the smooth, perfect skin. Obviously Pamela had been coming here for days. She had not abandoned herself to the sun but had gradually accepted it, exposing herself at first only momentarily while building up tolerance to the rays.

But was it insanity? Could she perhaps believe she lay sun-bathing on some Mediterranean beach? Was she on holiday somewhere inside her skull? Had she forgotten the world was lurching under the impact of shattered genes? Did her mind pretend to itself that nothing had changed?

He could have borne a realisation of her insanity but something told him that the girl was as sane or saner than Stoddard himself. Her actions as she turned over were deliberate and calm, they showed none of the emphatic motility of madness. She was dressed modestly now in the fine, pale sand which clung to her sweating body. Once it seemed she looked straight at him but her eyes passed on, unseeing or uncaring that there was a watcher on the cliff-top.

A fear had grown in him. A fear that the meaning of life was lost and that Pamela knew and accepted it. He was afraid that her acceptance would force him to accept it too. She had decided, he thought, that the world of mankind was finished. The world had rejected her kind as master and now belonged again to the primeval god of fire. In Stoddard's mind at least, Pamela Barnett had decided that the only way she could survive was by accepting the new order, by offering herself as sacrifice to the new-old god in the hope that the offering would bring salvation. At the beginning she had hated the sun, hated what it was doing to the ova inside her.

The idea was as crazy as the others but somehow more irrationally human. Crazy only because reality had turned crazy.

He let the idea sink away and pushed the fear under with it, replacing it with the daily conviction that contact would be re-established with the mainland. It might still happen. It was certain to.

A week passed. It could possibly have been two weeks or a month. The heat was debilitating. Stoddard was tired. Each day merged into the next in his memory; the stench, the boredom, the hours spent watching Pamela Barnett. Things had ceased to mean anything. Pamela had turned brown, a deep tan had replaced the redness. At the end of the week or month Stoddard stopped visiting the cliff-top. The world shrank to his room and occasional, diffident visits to the algae tanks. He no longer made any pretence of being in control of the station.

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And then years passed. And Stoddard and Manji and the others whom Stoddard never talked to were old men — although not enough years had passed to make them old. But nothing changed. Manji still tended his tanks of stinking algae and Stoddard sometimes went to the north of the island to search the empty beaches through binoculars.

It was late afternoon when Manji burst into the bedroom "The binoculars," he demanded excitedly.

Stoddard was only half awake. "What?"

"Get up. We've spotted a plane," Manji shouted.

Stoddard followed as Manji snatched the binoculars and raced from the room as quickly — undernourished legs could take him.

A small group of men stood on the beach staring into the western sky. The yellow globe of the sun sent streamers of brilliance dazzling over the swell of the waves.

One of the Indians pointed silently as the two men ran up.

"It's circling," Manji said. He brought the binoculars up to his eyes.

A silver dot travelled slowly across the horizon.

Agonised, one of the men said, "It's going past. It's missing us."

Manji brought the binoculars down. The expression of macabre glee he usually warded tragedy off with was missing. He handed them to Stoddard and began to walk slowly back towards the buildings.

Stoddard looked through the glasses.

The silver dot focussed into a globe, featureless, shining in the mirrored rays of the sun, perfect in its roundness.

Whatever had made and flew the globe had gone beyond human technology. Genes had mutated, it hardly mattered from what loins the genes had sprung, whether they had come from an anthropoid ape, a dog, or man himself. Stoddard realised the meaning of the flying machine. Man was obsolescent. The next step up the evolutionary ladder had been taken. When the machine had dissolved into the glare of the sun he dropped the glasses into the sand and turned away.

Along the beach, in the distance, he made out the naked figure of Pamela Barnett, her body as youthful and darkly golden as a heat mirage. She stood at the edge of the water and stared into the nova bright sky where the machine had disappeared. He realised then that something more than mere distance separated them.

The woman was as alien as anything the disaster had created.

Secretly she always had been.

There was nothing left to hide now. Perhaps that was why she'd discarded her clothes. Or maybe she was crazy. Adapted to a mad environment.

"She'll go blind if she looks at the sun much longer," he thought.



NEXT ISSUE:

In *My Time Your Time*, David Penny shows us the problems a starliner crewman faces when he comes home after five hundred years; how he is shunned as is Sandi for another reason, a young woman he meets.

On the planet Tipit, live creatures like large dragon-flies. It is not their size that is impressive but the incredible power they possess — and Sandi possesses a tame Kree . . .

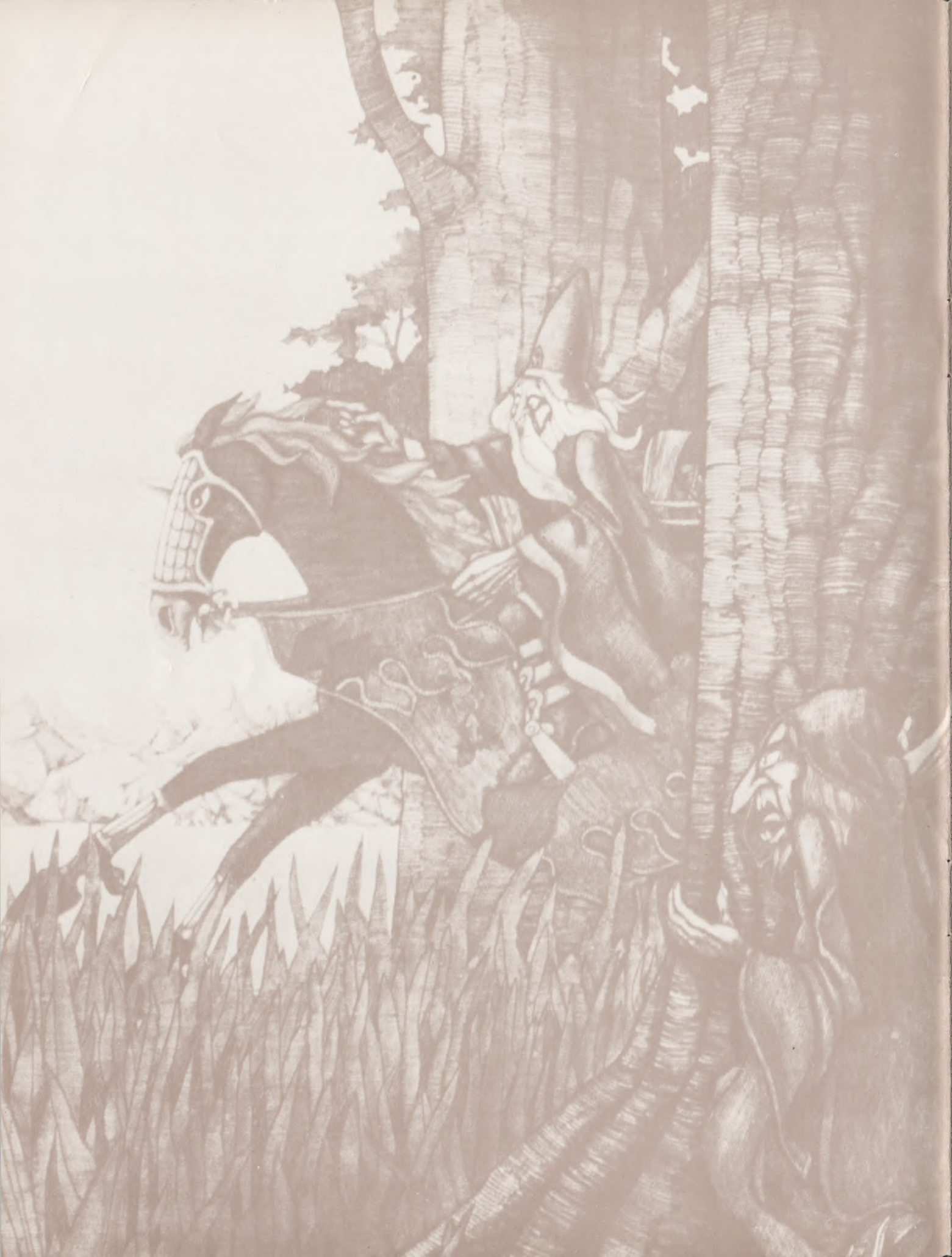
Raven Christchild concludes his remarkable "Englishman's Lady" series with *The Agonies Of Time*. Steve Mitchell's Time Machine is given a spin, Sexton Cromlech appears on stage with 'The Rites of Eternity' but continues his act into real life — and Johnny Terrier learns that he is really two people.

Michael Moorcock's *The End Of All Songs* continues its characters' extravagant adventures, and Amelia Underwood throws the strangest party such that even the denizens at the End of Time have never before witnessed.

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